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Volume XXV

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A Peer-Reviewed Research Journal of
ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṄKARADEVA SAṄGHA

Editor

Dr. Hitendra Nath Deka



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MAHĀPURUṢA JYOTI (ISSN 2277-2901): Peer-Reviewed Research Journal of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha, Volume XXV, edited by Dr. Hitendra Nath Deka, Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry, Baosi Banikanta Kakati College, Nagaon, Barpeta (Assam) and published by Sri Kushal Thakuria, General Secretary, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha, Nagaon, Assam, February, 2026.

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Mahāpuruṣa Jyoti is an open access peer reviewed research journal of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha published by the Literary Committee of the Saṅgha. It is an annual journal published regularly in the first half of the month of February. The aim of the journal is to create a scholarly field of original research on the multidimensional contributions of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva towards literature, music, drama, paintings, architecture, choreography, handicraft, yoga, philosophy, religion, social reforms, politics, economy, culture, adult education, national integration, ethics, feminism, humanism, environmental science etc. It also aims at bringing into general consensus about the controversial issues related to the saint. At the same time, this English journal has another greater objective ahead of it. It is to disseminate the universal contribution of the great saint all over the world and create a field of comparative study on Śaṅkaradeva and his contributions with the other stalwarts of the world. The journal has been published regularly since the year, 2000. The journal follows latest guidelines and suggestive parameters issued by the UGC.

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Editorial

In the modern era, material science has advanced at an unprecedented pace, bringing remarkable transformations to human life. While these developments have enhanced comfort and convenience, they have also given rise to serious challenges for human civilization, primarily due to the inadequate growth of spiritual and moral values. Material achievements, when pursued without ethical balance, gradually erode fundamental human virtues such as compassion, honesty, patience, and empathy. The relentless race for wealth, power, and luxury often results in environmental degradation, social inequality, and crisis affecting both physical and mental well-being. In this context, religious and spiritual beliefs play a crucial role in sustaining humanity through periods of profound change. Faith nurtures hope and resilience, enabling long-term responses to the deeper causes of humanitarian crisis. It is for this reason that a large proportion of the world's population continues to follow religious or spiritual paths.

Against this broader backdrop, the birth of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva in the fifteenth century in the north-eastern region of India marks a significant spiritual and cultural milestone. A visionary saint, Śaṅkaradeva was a religious preacher, social reformer, a poet par excellence, musician, dramatist, and a profound philosopher. He propagated *Eka Śaraṇa Harināma Dharma*, firmly grounded in *Vedānta Darśana*, advocating devotion, ethical living, and spiritual unity. Through his monumental literary and philosophical works, he opened the path of knowledge for the common people, enabling them to quench their spiritual thirst. By innovating a powerful form of mass communication in the shape of *Bhāṇā*, he successfully conveyed the teachings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*- the foundation of his faith—to the unlettered masses. He also composed devotional songs, known as *Bargīta*, which continue to inspire devotion and moral reflection.

In one such *Bargīta-Nārāyaṇa Kāhe Bhakati Karo Terā*, meaning “*O Nārāyaṇa, how should I offer my devotion unto You?*”, Śaṅkaradeva expresses a deeply ecological and universal vision-

jata jība jaṅgama kīta pataṅgama aga naga jaga terī kāyā

Through these lines, Śaṅkaradeva affirms that the divine presence manifests throughout all forms of life and nature. Reinforcing this idea, he further writes-

īśa svarūpe hari saba ghaṭe baiṭhaha jaisana gagana biyāpi

Here, he proclaims that God pervades the entire universe, just as the sky envelops all existence. If individuals internalize this spiritual vision, humanity can aspire to live in peace, harmony, and environmental sustainability.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha, a socio-religio-cultural and democratic organization founded in 1930 A.D, was established with the objective of promoting the tenets of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva worldwide in the purest form. Over the decades, the *Saṅgha* has made significant progress in this mission through the publication of numerous valuable works each year. Among these endeavours, *Mahāpuruṣa Jyoti*, an annual peer-

reviewed research journal, occupies a distinguished place. I had been entrusted with the responsibility of bringing out Volume XXV of this journal, which is a matter of immense pride and joy for me. This volume is scheduled to be released during the 95th Annual Conference of the *Saṅgha*, to be held at *Jyoti-Biṣṇu Samanvaya Kṣetra, Dhalāibil-Nāharbāri Pāthar, Jamugurihāt, Sonitpur, Assam*, in February 2026.

With deep gratitude, I sincerely thank all the learned contributors who have enriched this volume with their scholarly write-ups. We express our heartfelt thanks to *Mahāmānya Padādhikār Bāp* and *Pradhān Sampādak Bāp*, along with all the respected members of the Central Executive Committee. We are equally grateful to the respected members of the *Sāhitya Śākhā Samiti* (Literary Section) of the Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha for their guidance and support. I must also acknowledge, with sincere appreciation, the invaluable assistance rendered by Dr. Biswajit Kalita and Dr. Babul Barhoi in bringing out this issue. Finally, I extend thanks to the proprietor as well as the Management of Sivam Offset Press, Rangiya, for their dedicated efforts in ensuring the timely publication of this volume.

Dr. Hitendra Nath Deka
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Bhāratavarṣa in Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Bhakti Literature with Special Reference to Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and His Followers

- Dr. Archana Barua^{*}
- Dr. Ananya Barua^{**}

Abstract

The Neo Vaiṣṇavite Movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam may be called a part of the all-India Vaiṣṇava movement of the Middle Ages, but with innovative ideas in the principles best suited for the people. The significance of the *Bhakti* movement comes from this multiplicity on the one hand and the continuous interaction between them on the other. Śaṅkaradeva dreamt of a *Bhāratavarṣa* that will uphold its age-old cherished *Sanātānī* and universal *Dhārmic* guidelines, that of *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*, that always inspires one for nurturing and glorifying egalitarian and liberal ideals that lead to creative dialogue for concord and solidarity rather than discord and disharmony in any form.

Śaṅkaradeva's distinctive way of understanding *Bhāratavarṣa*, also in terms of all its people, *bhaktas*, and the regions, all together make what we have the *devaro durlabha* land of ours. It is *Bhāgavata bhakti*-centric and universal; humanitarian ideals of religion, such as *ahiṃsā paramo dharma*, etc., are the core *sanātānī* ideals of Hinduism also. This article will explore aspects of the creative intercultural dialogue that can be philosophically framed to revisit and revitalise lost horizons, which inspired a positive outlook on life and its wisdom in nuanced ways.

Keywords: Śaṅkaradeva, Bhāratavarṣa, India, Hindustān, Janapada, ahiṃsā, sanātana-dharma.

Introduction

Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva spoke frequently in his writings about his pride in being an Indian. *Bhāratavarṣa*, he said, is a land coveted even by the gods, and one can be born an Indian on the strength of the piety acquired through many births. Śaṅkaradeva wrote in the 'Anādi-Pātana' (vv. 112–113) section of the *Bhāgavata* thus: "This India is the best of all lands. Even gods find pleasure in being born here. We don't want a living in the imaginary world of heaven. Rather, we would die young by being born here. The birth in India is like the nine treasures of Kubera (*nabanidhi*)...How virtuous are they that they have had the land, which we have been yearning for day and night." Besides, Śaṅkaradeva devoted a whole chapter entitled *Bhāratabhūpraśamsā* (in praise of India) in his Sanskrit *Bhakti Ratnākara*.

Dr. Maheswara Neog, in one of his valuable addresses on "The Contribution of the Śaṅkaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilization of India", subtitles one of the sections "Śaṅkaradeva introduces India to Assam". The *Bhakti* movement indeed introduced India to different regions; it also introduced the regions to India, a larger cultural space that could accommodate a multiplicity of thoughts and ideas. There is this continuous reorganization of the relation between the two: the region and India, the *Nāḍu* and *Deśa* in respect of language,

myth, legends, philosophical ideas, music, and other arts, as well as various other mundane activities. The significance of the movement comes from this multiplicity on the one hand and the continuous interaction between them on the other (Neog 30-31).

In this background, we may now make an attempt at re-visiting the idea of *Bhāratavarṣa* in early ancient scriptures and traditions, comprising of both *bhakti*-based traditions, or other secular, political, cultural references of the land, at times called with different names, mostly as *Bhāratavarṣa*, Hindustān, and later also with the British regime's name, India. What follows is an account of these various names that this land came to be associated with, phase-wise and at times parallel.

The study revisits the idea of *Bhāratavarṣa* in early ancient scriptures and traditions. It also seeks to revisit the significance of the regions and their contributions to the common mosaic of *Bhāratavarṣa*. Besides, the *Bhakti* movement shared some common concerns and reformist positions, such as caste and gender liberal positions among the Assamese Vaiṣṇavas, more than in other parts of the country. The paper explores Śaṅkaradeva's distinctive way of understanding *bhakti* and *bhakta*-centric *Bhāratavarṣa* in sharing a *bhakti*-based relation with the worshipable God Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, the loving and compassionate aspect of the preserver aspect of the Lord. The study also revisits the core principles of *sanātana* Hinduism.

The paper is prepared on the basis of secondary data that are collected from various studies on Śaṅkaradeva, religion, philosophy, medieval history of India, and from net surfing. The findings of the study on the selected objectives are discussed and analyzed in the following subheadings.

Re-visiting the idea of *Bhāratavarṣa* in early ancient scriptures and traditions:

This ancient land of ours that nurtured a uniquely rich and varied civilization is known as both Bharat and India as per the Constitution of India as well: "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States". Besides these two names, this land is also referred to as Hindustān, and often these three names were synonymously used phase-wise also during the country's 'Freedom Struggle' for independence from the British colonial regime in the 20th century. In his innovative work *The Discovery of India*, that he completed writing during his imprisonment phase for India's freedom struggle (1942 to 1946), Pandit Nehru writes, in the "Bharat Mata" section of chapter three: "Often as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audiences of this India of ours, of Hindustān and of Bhārata, the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founders of the race" (Nehru 59). In this manner, although these three names came to be synonym for the same country- *Bhāratavarṣa*, the land of the Bhāratas, also known as India and Hindustān- Dr. Bhuyan wonders whether these three names are completely synonymous or do they bear some distinctiveness of their own? (Bhuyan 55).

Actually, both these names, "India" (from the Greek *Indos*) and "Hind", derived from the Sanskrit *Sindhu*, which refers to the same Indus River; the term Hindu itself, as a designation for the people of the region, first appeared in Persian and Arabic. Later, Greek and Roman writers kept using this word. These names derive their meaning from the association of the Sindhu River, and for the first time, the word Hind came to be

representative of a geographically defined marked land domain during Delhi Sultan 'Alā'uddīn Khiljī's reign only. Since the time of the Mughals, the word Hindustān became popular, as '-stān' in Pārsī is 'sthāna' in Sanskrit; from the 1600 to 1800 period, the word Hindustān came to refer to the vast area of South Asia represented by the word. Similarly, when the 3rd century Greek ruler Seleukos Nikētōr's messenger Megasthenes was sent to the royal court of Candragupta Maurya, later Megasthenes referred to that portion the Maurya ruler ruled part of the country as *Indikā* (Barrow .37-39). So these names did not hamper the administrative policies of the land, as we also find that the 14th century Vijayanagara king Harihara II wrote in Sanskrit the title *Hindurāya Sūratrāṇa* in his rock inscription, although the word Hindu here represented the land, rather than any other *Dhārmic* connotation of the term (Barrow 42-43).

In terms of cultural solidarity, this ancient land, *Bhāratavarṣa*, has shown this since earlier times. Different religions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Brāhmaṇism, etc., penetrated different parts of the land, and this paved the way for cultural harmonization, as is evident in various rock and other inscriptions in medieval times. Even in the 1st century, a famous cave inscription in the Prākṛta language, known as the *Hāthīgumphā Lipi* inscription of King Khāavela, the ruler of Kālīṅga, mentions his invasion of *Bhāratavarṣa* during the tenth year of his reign. The 3rd century B.C. rock inscription of Maurya Emperor Aśoka mentions *Jambūdvīpa*. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, in the section "*Jagat-sṛṣṭi-sambandham Bhāratavarṣa-varṇanam*," the first man Svāyambhu Manu's seven sons are referred to as the rulers of the seven islands, of which the most distinctive one is the *Jambūdvīpa*, and with the story of how this island was created, it also glorifies the special part of this *Jambūdvīpa*, the land of ours, *Bhāratavarṣa* as we know it, also with some other synonymous names as mentioned earlier. Śaṅkaradeva cites from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* in his translations of some such *bhakti*-based Purāṇic texts: "The country (*varṣam*) that lies north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains is called *Bhāratam*; there dwell the descendants of Bharata"- *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*!

As per historians' perspectives, this time the main occupation for the people was animal rearing (*paśu-pālana*); these tribes were mostly pastoral and nomadic. In later post-Vedic literature, only the word *Janapada* is used to refer to a particular place that was occupied by a particular group of people, the *Janas*. "The most noteworthy part of these early references of the word Bhārata in Vedic and other early texts is that the word did not denote a geographical space confined in a particular way; in these references the word stood for the people, which was also called as *jana* (as in *jana-pratinidhi* etc.) or later *janapada*" (Talbot 695).

Re-Focusing the philosophy of inclusivity in *sanātana-dharma*: *bhakti* and *bhakta* centric Bhāratavarṣa of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's dream:

In Śaṅkaradeva's and other *Bhakta*-sants' compositions, Bhāratavarṣa was sacred not for the number of people or for quantity-wise priorities that one may bestow upon it. In the *Bhakti* Movement especially, equal importance was given to both *deśa* and *pradeśa*, both nation and region, both the so-called mainstream and the peripheries- the left-out ones, the marginal, even women and Śūdra in particular- who were discriminated against in major

Brāhmanical Hindu religions focusing more on caste and gender than on the core principles of *sanātana* and universal *Dharma* of *Vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*.

Bhāratavarṣa, for these *Bhakta*-sants, is a land coveted even by the gods, and one can be born an Indian on the strength of the piety acquired through many births. Subsequent Neo-Vaiṣṇavite followers- Mādhavadeva, Dāmodardeva, Bhaṭṭadeva, and others- are full of praise for Bhāratavarṣa, the land of Viṣṇu and Vaiṣṇavas, of *bhakta* and *Bhagavān*.

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India. Most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the *Veda*. The main Hindu texts are the *Vedas* and their supplements (books based on the *Vedas*). *Veda* is a Sanskrit word meaning “knowledge.” These scriptures do not mention the word “Hindu,” but many scriptures discuss *dharma*, which can be rendered as “code of conduct,” “law,” or “duty.” Scholars sometimes draw attention to the caste system as a defining feature, but many Hindus view such practices as merely a social phenomenon or an aberration of their original teachings. However, still others identify their tradition with *sanātana-dharma*, the eternal order of conduct that transcends any specific body of sacred literature.

Hindus generally believe that *dharma* was revealed in the *Vedas*, although a more common word there for “universal law” or “righteousness” is *Ṛta*. *Dharma* is the power that maintains society; it makes the grass grow, the sun shine, and makes us moral people, or rather gives humans the opportunity to act virtuously. This conflict is also seen in dialogues between *Dharma-Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* and those who understand only *varṇa* and *āśrama dharma* as the sole deciding factors.

This *Sanātana-dharma* is periodically lost for some time till it is restored again through divine intervention. In this fallen age of *Kali*, it is again to fill this vacuum that people prayed for God to intervene, as per God’s own submission to His devotees that whenever there is a rise of injustice and *adharma*, God periodically intervenes to restore true *Dharma* once again. When *Hiraṇyakaśipu* crossed all limits of *dharma*, inflicting the worst possible punishments on his own son *Prahlāda*- whose only fault was that he remained an *ekānta-bhakta* of the Lord- Viṣṇu, assuming the man-lion form (*Nṛsiṃha*), kills *Hiraṇyakaśipu* and offers a boon to *Prahlāda*, the faithful devotee of the Lord. “Possessing the Lord, *Prahlāda* desires nothing else, his only prayer being that his father be completely purified from his sin of disrespecting the Lord, and he begs the Lord: ‘My *bhakti* for you is not for anything that I selfishly ask from you in return for my *bhakti*! My unconditional joy in serving your divine feet is my only reward! (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 450-451). This selfless devotion shows that *bhakti* for him is not a business in which something is expected in return; it remains *niṣkāma sevā* for *Prahlāda*. This unconditional love for God- and for serving humanity as service to God in turn- secures for him a unique blessing from the Lord. Viṣṇu tells him: “Those who follow your example in this world will become my devotees. Indeed, you will be a model for all my devotees” (Goswami 4). *Prahlāda* thus remains a role model for Śaṅkaradeva as well.

Understanding *dharma* more in terms of *sanātana-dharma* and its age-old values of “live and let others live,” Śaṅkaradeva made available this *dharmic* and tolerant face of *sanātana* Hinduism at a time when there was a gradual decline of values around us, including

proper religious guidance. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* thus places great importance on *satsaṅga*-the company of *sants*- as a means of God-realization. This *niṣkāma bhakti* and selfless devotion, with unconditional dedication to divine service and a strong commitment to serving *Viṣṇu-rūpī Vaiṣṇava* or *jīva-rūpī Śiva*, affirms that one must serve humanity as the true service of God.

If *dharma* and *mokṣa* are also the prime privileges in store for anyone fortunate enough to be born in this most divinely blessed land on earth, why should access to *dharma* not be kept open to all, without discrimination of *varṇa*, *jāti*, or *liṅga*? The Smārta scholar Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on the Brahma-sūtras proclaims that this Vedic path to *dharma* and *mokṣa* is forbidden to Śūdras- "*śravaṇa-adhyayana-artha-pratiśedhāt smṛteḥ sa asya*"-and that such fruits are to be received only by those who study the *Vedas* through *upanayana*. Thus, only the privileged classes proclaimed as *dvija* (Brāhmaṇas, etc.) are deemed eligible for *upanayana*, *mantra-dīkṣā*, *dāna*, and related rites.

Because of this discrimination against Śūdra and *strī* in particular, Śaṅkaradeva's *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* retains the centrality of the path of *bhakti* alone, forsaking the paths of *jñāna* and *karma*. The *Bhakti* cult in the Brahmaputra valley sings the glory of that culturally vibrant and spiritually enlightened Bhāratavarṣa, whose oldest *dharmic* tradition-*Śruti*, *Smṛti*, *Purāṇa*- together comprise the tradition of *sanātana-dharma*.

The late Satrādhikāra of Natun Kamalābāri Satra, himself a great scholar, comments that if by the terms *Śruti-Smṛti* and the Vedic path one understands only the *karma-mārga*, or the ritualistic aspect of the Vedas, then in that sense Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti-dharma* is as opposed to the *karma-mārga* as was the Buddha (Goswami 4-5). A subsequent *śloka* confirms this view: "*traiguṇya-viṣayā vedā nistrai-guṇyo bhavārjuna*" (*Gītā* 2.45). In other words, the *triguṇātma* (*sattva-rajas-tamas*) orientation is equivalent to the *sakāma-vāda* of the Vedic *pravṛtti-mārga* of *sakāma karma*; therefore, one should transcend these and orient oneself toward the *niṣkāma* path that lies beyond *triguṇa karma*. Mādhavadeva expresses this succinctly: "*tini guṇamayī veda bāna pariharā, gōwālira ghare gaiyā brahma cini dharā!*" (Goswami 5).

Śaṅkaradeva laid down *Śruti-Smṛti*-based guidelines as reflected in the Kṛṣṇa-Arjuna dialogue of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, emphasizing the centrality of loyal and chaste devotion and the importance of *eka-śaraṇa* to *eka-deva*: "*sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇam bhaja*." This remained the sole guiding principle for Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, enabling all *varṇas* of society to enter the path of *sanātana-dharma*, which is ever-present though at times in subtle form. Śaṅkaradeva's prime objective was to open the door of *bhakti* to the discriminated and marginalized, so that they might be elevated to the highest rank of purity simply by taking refuge in the shelter of an all-compassionate Lord through the singing of the glory of the Divine Name.

Śaṅkaradeva was particularly concerned with providing a secure shelter to these communities, along with other discriminated groups such as women and Śūdras in general.

barṇāśrama dharmma yata yāra yena bidhi āche
tārese kevale adhikāra;

harināma kīrttanata nāhike niyama eko
etekese dharma māje sāra. (Nāma-ghoṣā verse 119)

(*Trn.*: Each caste based faith has its own system, only its followers have rights over it. No such rights are in chanting Hari's Name, so of all faiths It is the best)

Revisiting the significance of the regions and their contributions in the common mosaic of Bhāratavarṣa:

Bhakti and *bhakta*-centric Bhāratavarṣa of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's dream posed a challenge to the traditional understanding of the pure-impure guidelines as per Brāhmaṇical Hindu norms, "the others" are called "impure" irrespective of their birth in a so-called "pure" caste according to Hinduism's caste-based pure/impure guidelines, if they have remained uninitiated. Śaṅkaradeva, rather, called these people "pure" who became devotees of his faith, *Ekaśaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, taking full refuge in the Lord. J. P. Rajkhowa comments: "Śaṅkaradeva named a number of impure people in consideration of the existing tribes who were outside the pale of Hinduism in his own days (Rajkhowa 412). Śaṅkaradeva's Assamese translation of the *Bhāgavata* replaces some earlier names of tribes and includes left-out names from this region, particularly adding more communities to the list. The additional names of tribes and communities from the region are thus:

kirāta, kachāri khāci gāro miri
yavana, kanka, gowāla;
asama muluka, dhobā ye turuka
Kubāca, mleccha, caṇḍāla (Bhagavata, 2. 53)

As Śaṅkaradeva founded *Ekaśaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, therefore we find Brāhmaṇa disciples of Kāyastha and Śūdra teachers, and even people who would be considered untouchables in other parts of India, as followers of a Satra. Nobody, on the other hand, is to be considered unfit for securing initiation (*nāma-śaraṇa*, as against *mantra-dīkṣā*) into the cult on caste considerations. Muslims were equally welcome into his religion. Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma comments: "The references here are not only to the so-called lower castes within the Hindu fold, but also to the tribes of the region as well as to the Yavanas and Turukas (Muslims) who are outside the pale of Hinduism. Shared rituals enhanced this space" (21). *Bhakti*-centric Śūfism and Vaiṣṇavism in Assam added a secular yet *bhakti*-centered common base to such an extent that all other external and man-made differences became redundant. Assamese Muslims and Assamese Sikhs are fully integrated with the Assamese language and culture. Both Śaṅkaradeva and Ājān Fakīr were particularly sensitive to spreading the message of *bhakti* through the media of art, language, dance, drama, and music. At the folk level, Assamese Muslims show close similarities with Assamese Hindus and have maintained cordial relationships. According to the historian Śāhabuddīn Ṭālīs, "Muslims in Assam were inclined more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims elsewhere" (Sarma 252).

Within the *bhakti* path, as devotees of the Lord, many who were otherwise marginalized are now seen as dignified devotees who alone can purify even *mūrti* and *tīrtha*. Śaṅkaradeva also took a soberly tolerant view of the customs of the tribes, normally frowned

upon by orthodox Hindus, as reflected in the following idea from his writings: even the Caṇḍāla, “who eats dog meat” and is an impure outcaste within Brāhmanical Hinduism, becomes highly pure here; likewise, “the utterly ignorant one who drinks liquor pleases God when His Name is remembered, sung, heard, or respected by them” (*Bhāgavata* 10. 1270).

There is reason to believe that one of the motives of Śaṅkaradeva, in keeping his religion so simple, was to keep the door open for all “non-believers,” including tribals who had no organized religion and who might otherwise be discouraged by excessive organizational rigour. Although provision was made for gradual cultural and temperamental refinement for an initiated person- through bodily hygiene, purity of mind, and channelizing passions in a God-oriented way- later, through gradations from *prākṛta bhakat* to *uttama bhakat*, there was mutual adjustment of Vaiṣṇavite *bhakti*-based norms, always in a dialogic manner.

This is why the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement could penetrate all corners of the North-East, especially hills and plains alike, cordially and harmoniously. More than external rituals, the inner mental disposition- the “caste of the mind” and the “sacrificial tendencies within us”- appeared to Śaṅkaradeva and other *bhakta-sants* as far more detrimental. It was never a call for intolerance toward different customs or food habits; rather, it recognized that this vast country is a unity in diversity and a composite culture resting on a harmonious platform.

Subsequent Neo-Vaiṣṇavite followers- Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva, Bhaṭṭadeva, and others- kept singing the glory of the human body (*nara-tanu*) and of the present *Kali-yuga*, which, though fallen, still retains the provision for the supremacy of *Nāma-kīrtana* for one and all, and particularly of this ancient and sacred land Bhāratavarṣa, for being instrumental in the path of *bhakti* alone.

According to the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, *bhakti* is the best subjective disposition for attaining God (*ekādaśa skandha*). Moreover, only in this land does the simple chanting of *nāma-kīrtana* lead to *mokṣa* instantly for all, irrespective of any man-made discrimination based on caste, creed, gender, or faith. *Bhaktas* even bypass *mukti*, as *bhakti* itself remains the supreme goal; this is why Bhāratavarṣa is celebrated as- *tatrāpi bhāratam śreṣṭham jambudvīpe mahā-mune, yato hi karma-bhūr eṣā hy ato 'nyā bhoga-bhūmayah* (*Bhakti Ratnakara* “*Bhārata-bhūpraśaṃsā*” verse 6).

Conclusion

However, our great ignorance remains, and Śaṅkaradeva remains an unknown name in the list of socio-cultural reformers of India, or else remains marginal to the mainstream majority, many of whom identify Hinduism only with rigid caste rules and the priest-controlled phases of its Brāhmanisation. However, those who can understand the deeper significance of the great and positive contributions made by these *bhakta-sants* across India, at different places and times, remain grateful for what they have left behind for us- legacies that will have a lasting impact for years to come. Dasaratha Ojha comments: “They tried to unite the whole nation by giving a composite language, a composite culture, and a common philosophy for living a happy and peaceful life. They tried to remove the despondency of the downtrodden people. Their contribution to life in India is thus unique. Their dramas are not

the property of only Assam, but they are a part of the common heritage of the whole of India” (Ojha 27).

Śaṅkaradeva and other *bhakta*-sants sing the eternal glory of Bhāratavarṣa, that cherished land which remains the goal and destination even for the gods- not for its riches or strength, but for the *puṇya* accumulated through its noble values of *dharma*, which speak of solidarity, harmony, love, compassion, and non-violence, as well as of *satya*- the movement from *asat* to *satya*, from death to deathlessness, and from darkness to light. Sankaradeva writes in the *Bhakti Ratnākara*:

*devasave niścaye gāvaya ehi gīta,
sehi dhanya yāra janma bhārata bhūmita.
bhāratata nara janma lavara kāraṇa,
paraya sādhibe yāra yena prayojana.
pāve svarga mokṣapada vaikunṭhaka paya,
bhārata-samāna karma bhūmi āna nāi.*

(Assamese version of *Bhakti Ratnākara* verse 218-219)

For these *bhakta*-saints, however, such “Indianness” must always leave room for discourses on harmony, peace, and tolerance as its central focus, along with the many peripheries that remain in constant dialogue within a *bhakti* and *bhakta*-centric Bhāratavarṣa. This is the true religiosity at heart- one that can boldly proclaim the truth that “man alone is Viṣṇu.”

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Bhakti, Aesthetics and Performance **Śaṅkaradeva's Vision in the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā***

-Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami*

Abstract

The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, conceived by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva in the fifteenth century, stands as a cornerstone of Assamese cultural and devotional expression. More than a theatrical performance, it embodies a living synthesis of *bhakti* (devotion), aesthetics (*rasa*) and Performance (*nāṭya*)- uniting spiritual emotion, moral instruction and artistic beauty within a single performative framework. This paper examines how Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical vision of *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*- the religion of devotion to one God- finds its artistic manifestation in *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*. By employing textual analysis of Śaṅkaradeva's plays and aesthetic theory derived from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Bhakti literature, the study investigates how devotion transforms into aesthetic emotion (*bhakti-rasa*) and performance becomes a ritual of moral and spiritual purification. The *Sūtradhāra*, *Gāyana-Bāyan* and ritualized body movements emerge as symbolic agents of faith, transforming the stage into a sacred space of transcendence. Further, the paper highlights how *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* serves as a tool of social reform, promoting equality, compassion and cultural integration through art. Ultimately, the study argues that Śaṅkaradeva's theatre is not merely an art form but a performative philosophy, where beauty becomes the expression of truth and devotion becomes the essence of performance.

Keywords: *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva, aesthetics, *rasa*, *Sūtradhāra*, Assamese theatre, devotional art.

Introduction

The emergence of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, a theatrical creation of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568), marks a decisive moment in the confluence of *bhakti*, aesthetics and performance in India's devotional and dramatic traditions. Conceived as a performative expression of the *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*- the religion of single-minded devotion to one God- *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* embodies the seamless synthesis of art and spirituality. As Farley P. Richmond (1974) observes, Vaishnava dramatists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries used theatre as one of the most effective means of disseminating devotion, for it united large audiences through entertaining yet didactic performances (145). Among these devotional traditions, Śaṅkaradeva's *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* of Assam stands out for its philosophical depth, aesthetic refinement and its living continuity as both ritual and art.

Śaṅkaradeva's contribution to Indian theatre transcends regional boundaries. As Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti (2013) notes, he was a master innovator who constructed a seven-layer stage for his maiden play *Cihna-yātrā* in 1468-considered the first play in any modern Indo-Aryan language- and employed young male actors for the first time in Indian drama. His plays, such

as *Patnī-prasāda*, *Kāliya-damana*, *Keli-Gopāla*, *Rukmini-haraṇa*, *Pārijāta-haraṇa* and *Rāma-
vijaya*, reveal a synthesis of classical dramaturgy and local performative idioms, creating a
unique theatrical form that was both philosophically profound and accessible to the masses.
These devotional plays, known as *Aṅkīyā-nāt*, are performed as *bhāona*- a vibrant theatrical
form that integrates music, dance, dialogue, and ritual gesture. The fusion of Sanskritic
aesthetics with indigenous Assamese folk elements gave rise to a distinctive form of sacred
theatre that continues to shape Assam’s cultural consciousness.

The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* cannot be understood merely as drama; it is a ritualized
performance of *bhakti*. The term *bhāonā* itself, as noted by Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and
Junmoni Gogoi (2024), derives from the Assamese word meaning “the act of pretending,”
(Goswami and Gogoi 44) used in the context of performing an *Aṅkīyā-nāt*. Rāmcaraṇ Thākur,
one of Śaṅkaradeva’s earliest biographers, described *bhāonā* as a mode of worship- *bhāonā
karihe kṛṣṇa pujibe lāgaya* (to perform *bhāonā* is to worship *Kṛṣṇa*) - which reflects how
performance itself becomes an act of devotion (Duttabaruah 681). This transformation of art
into ritual distinguishes Śaṅkaradeva’s theatre from other Vaishnavite forms such as *Rāmlilā*
or *Jātra*, which evolved into secular entertainment. In contrast, the Assamese *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*
has retained its sacred and participatory essence through centuries of transmission in
monasteries (*sattras*) and community spaces (*nāmghars*).

The philosophical foundation of Śaṅkaradeva’s theatre lies in his vision of *bhakti-rasa*-
the aesthetic emotion of devotion. According to Pradīp Jyoti Mahanta (2025), Śaṅkaradeva’s
interpretation of *rasa* transforms the classical concept of aesthetic pleasure into a spiritual
experience of divine love, where *Bbhakti* becomes the ultimate *rasa* (xv-xxv). Drawing from
Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the devotional poetics of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śaṅkaradeva
crafted a theatre where emotion (*bhava*) is refined into transcendence (*rasa*) and performance
becomes a means of realizing truth through beauty. This aesthetic vision transforms the stage
into a sacred site of revelation (*nāṭya-yajña*), where performers and spectators alike experience
unity with the divine.

The form and structure of the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* illustrate this philosophical intent. The
performance opens with *pūrvaraṅga*, a musical and ritual prelude performed by *gāyana-bāyan*
(singers and drummers), followed by the entrance of the *Sūtradhāra*- the narrator, director and
spiritual mediator of the play. As Madan Sarma and Parasmoni Dutta (2009) describe in their
ethnographic account of the *Bāresaharīyā Bhāonā Festival*, the *Sūtradhāra*’s entry,
accompanied by rhythmic percussion and stylized gestures, transforms the performance space
into a spiritual microcosm (305). His role extends beyond narration; he sanctifies the stage
through dance, gesture and recitation, bridging the visible and the invisible realms. The *agni-
gaḍ* (arch of light), with nine flames symbolizing the nine forms of *bhakti*, marks the threshold
between the mundane and the divine- a ritual that signifies the beginning of aesthetic devotion.
From a performative standpoint, Śaṅkaradeva’s theatre reflects both innovation and synthesis.
As Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1958) observed, Śaṅkaradeva “perfected a technique of
theatre based on a synthesis of Sanskrit and indigenous traditions suited to the needs and taste
of the times” (76). He introduced *painted scenes*, symbolic gestures and spatial architecture
that mirrored Assamese folk forms such as *Ojāpālī* and *Putalā Nāc*. As Mrinal Jyoti Goswami

(2023) points out, the *namghar*- the Assamese prayer hall- served as the first permanent performance space and the aesthetic principles of *āhāryabhinaya* (costume, ornament and scenic elements) in *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* were inspired by indigenous craftsmanship and folk architecture (65-77). Thus, the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* was both a theological innovation and a cultural revival, embodying the Assamese synthesis of folk creativity and classical refinement.

Furthermore, Śaṅkaradeva's plays embody a social vision rooted in inclusivity and ethical transformation. His theatre emerged as a counter-narrative to the rigid caste hierarchy of medieval Assam. Through collective participation in *nāma-kīrtana* and *bhāonā*, Śaṅkaradeva democratized religious experience, making divine communion accessible to all, irrespective of caste, gender, or literacy. In the words of Neog (1965), Śaṅkaradeva's genius lay in transforming devotion into a social and artistic force," creating a moral community bound by faith and aesthetic discipline.

Thus, the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* represents an integrated vision where *bhakti*, aesthetics and performance coalesce into a unified act of spiritual experience. It is not merely a relic of medieval piety but a living art that continues to express Assamese identity and philosophical depth. The present study examines this synthesis by exploring how Śaṅkaradeva's vision of devotion translates into aesthetic form- through language, gesture, music and community participation. In this context, the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* stands as a profound example of performative theology, where beauty becomes the expression of faith and performance becomes the pathway to liberation.

Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of *bhakti* and aesthetic vision

At the philosophical core of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's artistic universe lies *bhakti*-devotion as the supreme mode of experiencing and realizing the divine. His religious movement, known as *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma* (the religion of taking refuge in the One God through chanting His name), represents not only a theological system but also an aesthetic philosophy, where art and devotion become two dimensions of the same spiritual pursuit. For Śaṅkaradeva, *bhakti* was not a mere sentiment of piety but an experiential knowledge (*anubhava jñāna*), attained through emotion, rhythm and creative expression. His doctrine emphasized unmediated devotion, equality and compassion, challenging the ritualistic orthodoxy and caste hierarchies that dominated 15th-century Assamese society (Sarma *New Vaisnavite Movement* 17).

Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* philosophy finds its metaphysical foundation in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, especially the *Daśama Skandha*, which he translated into Assamese to make it accessible to the common people. His interpretation of the text foregrounds the concept of *Parama Brahma*- the One Supreme Being manifest as Kṛṣṇa or Nārāyaṇa- who is both immanent and transcendent. As Satyendranath Sarma, Maheswar Neog points out, Śaṅkaradeva's devotional system rests on four essential principles: (1) *bhakti* as the sole means of salvation, (2) *nām* (chanting of God's name) as the highest form of worship, (3) *satsaṃga* (collective devotion) as moral communion and (4) *sevā* (service) as the practical expression of faith (Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times* 218-245; Sarma, *The New Vaisnavite Movement* 48-59). This combination of emotional intensity and ethical engagement made Śaṅkaradeva's

bhakti a comprehensive spiritual discipline expressed through community, performance and art.

In Śaṅkaradeva's vision, *bhakti* is not an abstract philosophical concept but a transformative state of being, achieved through surrender (*śaraṇa*), humility (*vinaya*) and emotional purification (*bhava-śuddhi*). The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, his principal lyrical text, encapsulates this devotion through verses that combine musical rhythm with philosophical clarity. As Maheswar Neog (1955) remarks, Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* reconciles the intellectualism of Vedānta with the emotionalism of the *bhakti* movement, offering "a spiritual synthesis where knowledge finds fulfillment in love" (108). This devotional ideal is deeply aesthetic- *bhakti* is both the subject and the object of artistic creation.

In this framework, art becomes a medium of spiritual realization. Every act of singing (*gāna*), dancing (*nṛtya*), or acting (*nāṭya*) is considered a form of worship, a bodily manifestation of divine remembrance (*nām-smaraṇa*). As Pradip Jyoti Mahanta (2025) notes, Śaṅkaradeva's reinterpretation of *bhakti* as *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) elevates the performer's role from artist to devotee- transforming the stage into a space of self-transcendence rather than exhibition (xv-xxv). Thus, the *Aṅkīyā-bhāṇā*, in embodying the philosophy of *bhakti*, transforms performance into prayer and aesthetic pleasure (*rasa-ananda*) into spiritual bliss (*bhakti-ananda*).

Śaṅkaradeva's aesthetic philosophy finds resonance with classical Indian aesthetics, particularly Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Abhinavagupta's *rasa* theory, yet it departs from them in profound ways. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* defines *rasa* as the aesthetic relish arising from the transformation of emotion (*bhava*) into universalized experience (*rasa-anubhava*). Śaṅkaradeva, however, expands this concept by interpreting *rasa* as divine emotion- not a detached aesthetic pleasure but an intimate union with God through love. His art thus transforms *Śṛīngāra Rasa* (erotic love) and *Karuṇa Rasa* (compassion) into *Bhakti-Rasa* (devotional love).

According to Joy Krishna Mahanta (2025), this shift represents the spiritualization of aesthetic theory, where *rasa* becomes the medium of liberation rather than entertainment (136). In the *Aṅkīyā-bhāṇā*, the emotional responses of the audience- empathy, wonder, compassion- are not mere aesthetic responses but acts of devotion. The experience of *rasa* is directed toward the divine rather than the dramatic character, turning the theatre into a sacred field of emotion (*bhava-ṣetra*).

This transformation aligns with Śaṅkaradeva's conception of art as *sadhanā* (spiritual practice). The disciplined performance of dance, music and drama purifies both performer and spectator, leading to emotional sublimation (*bhava-śuddhi*). As Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and Junmoni Gogoi (2024) notes, Śaṅkaradeva's use of indigenous performance techniques- rhythmic movement, symbolic gesture (*mudrā*) and sacred space- ensures that *aesthetic expression becomes meditation in motion*, where beauty and devotion merge in bodily rhythm (45). The emphasis on inward concentration and simplicity over spectacle reflects the devotional restraint central to his philosophy.

The ethical dimension of Śaṅkaradeva's aesthetic philosophy is equally central. For him, *bhakti* is inseparable from moral action (*dharma*). The true artist is not one who pleases

the eye or ear but one who refines the soul. This belief shaped the moral code of the *śāstras* (monastic institutions), where aesthetic training was inseparable from ethical discipline. The *bhaktas* (monastic performers) were trained in dance and music as acts of *sevā* (service to God), cultivating humility and spiritual concentration. As Richmond (1974) observes, Śaṅkaradeva's innovation lay in transforming theatre into a moral instrument, one that "engaged the community in religious participation through shared performance" (148).

The integration of art and ethics also manifests in the didactic content of Śaṅkaradeva's plays. The mythological narratives- drawn from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Rāmāyaṇa*- are dramatized not for spectacle but for moral reflection. The characters embody virtues like truth (*satya*), loyalty (*bhakti*) and compassion (*karuṇa*), serving as moral exemplars. The performance itself becomes an ethical act: the actor's discipline, the musician's devotion and the audience's attention collectively enact Śaṅkaradeva's vision of "spiritual harmony through aesthetic morality".

Beyond theology and aesthetics, Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* philosophy had a profound socio-cultural function. His devotional theatre became a tool for cultural integration in a region fragmented by linguistic, ethnic and caste divisions. Through the communal performance of *bhāonā* and *ṇām-kīrtana*, he united diverse communities under the shared experience of *rasa* and *bhakti*. As Sarma and Dutta (2009) document in their study of the *Baresaharīyā Bhāonā Festival*, the performance functions as "a collective ritual reaffirming social solidarity and ethical continuity" (305). This participatory nature transforms the audience from passive observers into co-creators of devotion, embodying Śaṅkaradeva's ideal of a spiritually egalitarian society.

Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* thus transcends personal salvation to embrace a collective moral awakening. Through art, he transformed faith into community and through aesthetics, he transformed emotion into ethics. In the synthesis of *bhakti*, *rasa* and *dharma*, Śaṅkaradeva realized what may be called a "performative theology"- a vision where the beauty of art becomes the reflection of divine truth and the stage becomes the mirror of spiritual realization.

The aesthetic and performative structure of *Aṅkīyā-Bhāonā*

The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* devised by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva represents a unique theatrical synthesis that unites the sacred, aesthetic and social dimensions of performance. It exemplifies what Farley Richmond (1974) describes as "a Vaishnava theatre of devotion, where ritual, drama and music merge into a unified act of worship" (146). Śaṅkaradeva envisioned theatre as a living embodiment of *bhakti*, where *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) and *dharma* (moral order) find performative realization. The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* integrates the elements of *nāṭya* (drama), *nṛitya* (dance) and *gīta* (songs) in perfect harmony, reflecting both the classical influence of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the folk vibrancy of Assamese cultural idioms.

The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* is the performance form of the *Aṅkīyā-nāṭa*, and the plays are based on episodes from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, or *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa*. The term *aṅkīyā* (from Sanskrit *aṅka*, meaning act or episode) indicates that each play constitutes a single narrative unit focusing on a divine episode. As Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti (2013) explains, Śaṅkaradeva structured these plays to be compact yet emotionally powerful, ensuring accessibility and spiritual concentration for mass audiences (4). The corresponding

performance, called *bhāonā*, thus became both a dramatic and a devotional event- its aim not to entertain, but to evoke *bhakti-rasa*, the aesthetic emotion of devotion.

Each *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* begins with a *pūrvāranga*, a ceremonial prelude consisting of music, dance and ritual gestures performed by the *gāyana-bāyana* (choral musicians). The *pūrvāranga* serves as the threshold between the mundane and the divine, purifying the performance space and preparing both performers and spectators for spiritual engagement. The rhythm of the *khol* (drum) and *tāl* (cymbals), accompanied by devotional chants, transforms the environment into an immersive auditory field of worship. As Maheswar Neog (1965) notes, the *pūrvāranga* in Śaṅkaradeva's plays functions not as an introduction but as consecration- the moment when the aesthetic act becomes sacred (257-264).

At the centre of the performance stands the *Sūtradhāra*, arguably the most distinctive and philosophically charged element of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*. Borrowed from the classical Sanskrit theatre but reinterpreted through Śaṅkaradeva's devotional lens, the *Sūtradhāra* performs multiple roles- narrator, director, choreographer and spiritual mediator. He begins the performance with a dance sequence (*raṅga praveś*) and the recitation of an invocatory verse (*bhaṭimā*), praising Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu.

The *Sūtradhāra*'s function, as different researchers point out, extends beyond narration- he sanctifies the stage, guiding the emotional and spiritual journey of the audience, acting as both aesthetic craftsman and moral priest (Neog, *Sankaradeva and his Times* 246-275; Sarma, *New Vaisnavite Movement* 173-175). The *Sūtradhāra* uses stylized hand gestures (*mudrās*), facial expressions (*mukhābhīnaya*) and rhythmic footwork (*padasañcālana*) to punctuate narration with dance-like transitions. In doing so, he bridges the gap between performer and spectator, embodying Śaṅkaradeva's belief that art is a form of mediation between human consciousness and divine presence.

The language used by the *Sūtradhāra*- Brajāvalī, a blend of Assamese, Maithili and Braja- is equally significant. Brajāvalī created a devotional aura that transcended linguistic boundaries, making the play simultaneously local and universal. The rhythmic diction of the *bhaṭimā* and *śloka* sections evokes *rasa* not only through meaning but through sound, demonstrating Śaṅkaradeva's sensitivity to phonetic aesthetics as spiritual vibration.

The *gāyana-bāyana*, a group of singers (*gāyana*) and drummer and percussionists (*bāyana*), provides the rhythmic and musical foundation of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*. Their function extends far beyond accompaniment- they are the ritual heartbeat of the performance. The *bāyanas* play the *khol*, while the *gāyanas* sing *gīts* and play cymbals- devotional songs composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. The cyclical rhythm of the music guides both the *abhinaya* of the actors and the emotional pulse of the spectators.

As Richmond (1974) highlights, "The chorus in Assamese Vaishnava theatre functions as the collective voice of the community, transforming individual devotion into a shared aesthetic experience" (150). The *gāyana-bāyana*'s circular movements around the stage symbolize cosmic harmony- the unity of performer, community and deity. Their synchronized body gestures, rhythmic footwork and collective chanting epitomize the *bhakti* ideal of self-surrender through coordination and discipline.

According to Sarma and Dutta (2009), during community *bhāonās* such as the *Bāresaharīyā Bhāonā Festival* in Biswanath Chariali, the *gāyana-bāyana*'s role extends into social ritual; their rhythmic presence “weaves together devotion, discipline and community participation,” creating a sense of sacred rhythm that binds the village as one moral organism (307).

In *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, the art of *abhinaya* (expression) becomes the primary vehicle for the embodiment of *bhakti-rasa*. Śaṅkaradeva developed a highly codified system of gestures, postures and facial expressions drawn from both classical and local sources. His use of *hasta mudras* (hand gestures) corresponds to the descriptions in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, while the body language reflects Assamese folk traditions such as *Ojāpalī* and *Deodhānī Nṛitya* (Goswami 65-79).

The actors perform stylized movements that avoid realism in favour of symbolic representation. For instance, a gentle circular motion of the hand may signify divine grace, while the raised index finger indicates the supremacy of one God (*eka deva*). Each action is precise, rhythmic and spiritually charged, reflecting the performer's internal concentration. This abstraction transforms drama into meditation- aesthetic performance as spiritual discipline.

In the absence of elaborate stage machinery, *abhinaya* and vocal intonation create visual and emotional depth. The performers' use of *gīta-nṛtya-pada* (song-dance-recitation) simultaneously appeals to the intellect, senses and emotions.

Śaṅkaradeva's conception of theatrical space was deeply symbolic. In monastic contexts, the performance is held within the *nāmghar* or *kīrtanghar*- the community prayer hall- which serves as both theatre and temple. The *maṅikūta* (altar space) is treated as the sanctum where the *Guṇamālā* is placed, facing the performers. This architectural alignment ensures that performance remains cantered upon the divine gaze, making the act of viewing itself a devotional gesture.

The use of natural materials, oil lamps (*diyā*) and minimal decoration ensures a focus on spiritual content over visual opulence. The play of light and shadow from the lamps enhances the metaphoric duality of ignorance and enlightenment central to *bhakti* philosophy. The stage, thus, becomes an aesthetic altar, where ritual and drama dissolve into a single visual experience of faith.

The synthesis of *gīta* (songs), *nṛtya* (dance) and *nāṭya* (drama) within *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* exemplifies Śaṅkaradeva's vision of *samannvaya* (harmonious integration). As Pradip Jyoti Mahanta (2025) asserts that Śaṅkaradeva's theatre is a sacred orchestration of arts, where the body, sound and word unite in the realization of *bhakti*. Every element- song, rhythm, gesture and movement- contributes to a unified aesthetic experience that transcends form and points toward spiritual realization (xv-xxv).

This integration reflects Śaṅkaradeva's conviction that art, when disciplined and sincere, becomes a pathway to divine truth. In *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, performance itself is theology in action- a sensory mode of experiencing *bhakti*, a visual and rhythmic articulation of Śaṅkaradeva's spiritual philosophy.

Bhakti-Rasa* and emotional aesthetics in *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā

In the performative universe of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, *bhakti-rasa*- the aesthetic emotion of devotion- stands as the heart of both his religious and artistic vision. Through the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, Śaṅkaradeva translated spiritual devotion into performative emotion, transforming the classical concept of *rasa* from aesthetic pleasure to spiritual realization. Every gesture, tone and rhythm in his plays is designed to awaken in the spectator not worldly sentiment but transcendental emotion, leading to the realization of divine love (*prema-bhakti*). Śaṅkaradeva's innovation lies in transforming *rasa* from a sensory delight into a medium of spiritual elevation, where art becomes a journey from perception to realization.

According to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* arises when the emotional states (*bhava*) are expressed through performance and experienced universally by the sensitive spectator (*sahṛdaya*). Abhinavagupta later described *rasa* as "a taste of bliss," an aesthetic joy distinct from worldly emotion. Śaṅkaradeva accepted this theoretical foundation but redirected its emotional axis toward devotion. For him, the highest aesthetic emotion was not *śṛṅgāra* (erotic love) or *karuṇa* (compassion), but *bhakti*- love of God. His plays thus spiritualized the classical aesthetic model, redefining *rasa* as the bliss of divine union.

As Maheswar Neog (1965) explains, in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy *rasa* ceases to be a detached aesthetic experience and becomes a living act of devotion. The spectator is not an observer of dramatic illusion but a participant in a collective meditation. The performance does not imitate reality; it reveals spiritual truth. In this way, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* becomes a *nāṭya-yajña*- a theatrical sacrifice offered through emotion.

The emotional texture of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* is woven from the devotional themes of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The central emotion (*sthāyī-bhāva*) of all the plays is *prema-bhakti*, or selfless love for Kṛṣṇa, while secondary emotions (*vyabhicārī-bhāvas*) such as wonder (*adbhuta*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and humility (*vinaya*) enrich the spiritual experience. Śaṅkaradeva selected dramatic moments that naturally evoke the intensity of love and surrender, like the devotion of Rukmiṇī and the yearning of the *gopīs*- thereby ensuring that the aesthetic experience remains wholly spiritual.

The performance achieves this embodiment through music, rhythm, and gesture. The *gīts* sung by the *gāyana-bāyana* express devotional emotion in melodic form; their ascending and descending notes mirror the movement of yearning and surrender. The dancers' controlled gestures and serene facial expressions reflect the emotional equilibrium (*sthiti-bhāva*) of *bhakti-rasa*. In Śaṅkaradeva's aesthetic world, beauty is measured not by ornamentation but by emotional purity.

Śaṅkaradeva's performers are trained to internalize emotion before expressing it externally- the energy of *bhāva* must arise from inner concentration (*antar-sādhanā*); the outer gesture is merely its visible vibration. This process transforms the stage into a meditative field where acting becomes prayer. The subdued emotional register, the slow tempo of movement, and the repetitive musical cycles cultivate a mood of contemplation rather than excitement- guiding the mind from sensory engagement to spiritual absorption.

Two of Śaṅkaradeva's most celebrated plays, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* and *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, exemplify his translation of *rasa* into *bhakti*. In *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, the romantic motif of

Rukmiṇī's elopement with Kṛṣṇa becomes a metaphor for the soul's union with the divine. The emotional core is not earthly passion but divya-prema- spiritual love purified of desire. The *Sūtradhāra* introduces Rukmiṇī's longing through lyrical narration, and the *gīta koisano keśava darasana hoi; hari bine biphala janama sabo mui* expresses her surrender. Rukmiṇī's yearning symbolizes the devotee's aspiration for union with God; her abduction becomes the moment of deliverance. The audience, through rhythmic empathy, participates in this transformation of desire into devotion, experiencing *bhakti-rasa* as a shared transcendence.

In *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, Kṛṣṇa's playful act of bringing the celestial flower for Satyabhāmā dramatizes the tension between pride and surrender. Satyabhāmā's jealousy is resolved in humility, symbolizing the devotee's journey from ego to grace. The performance alternates between humour (*hāsya-rasa*) and devotion, demonstrating Śaṅkaradeva's mastery of emotional modulation. The reconciliation of Satyabhāmā and Kṛṣṇa represents the reconciliation of the finite and the infinite through the purgation of ego. Thus, *Pārijāta-haraṇa* reveals how *rasa* operates as moral purification (*bhāva-śuddhi*), turning theatre into ethical experience.

Unlike classical Sanskrit theatre, where the audience remains aesthetically detached, the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* invites the spectator into devotional participation. The audience sits facing the Maṅikūta- the altar of Kṛṣṇa- making their gaze part of the ritual. The performers frequently turn toward the deity rather than toward the audience, signifying that performance is directed to God, not to human spectators. Yet the audience, through rhythmic clapping, chanting, and collective emotion, becomes an active participant in worship.

As Richmond (1974) explains, Śaṅkaradeva's theatre achieves its effect by transforming the aesthetic distance between performer and spectator into a spiritual bond of shared devotion (p. 150). The aesthetic pleasure of *rasa* thus merges with the religious joy of *bhakti*. The spectator's tears, smiles, and sighs are not merely responses to the drama but offerings of devotion. Through this process, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* converts aesthetic empathy (*rasa-anubhava*) into collective transcendence (*sahaja-ānanda*).

Śaṅkaradeva's transformation of *rasa* also carries an ethical dimension. The purification of emotion within performance reflects his belief that art should refine the soul. The performer's control of gesture and emotion mirrors moral discipline, while the audience's participation reinforces virtues of humility, compassion, and unity. We can say- Śaṅkaradeva's art teaches emotion as ethics- beauty becomes a discipline of the heart. This ethical-aesthetic balance distinguishes *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* from both secular theatre and ritual spectacle.

In this sense, *bhakti-rasa* represents not only an aesthetic category but a moral and spiritual state. It reconciles the senses and the soul, transforming pleasure into insight. The serenity (*śānta-rasa*) that concludes every performance symbolizes the equilibrium of devotion achieved through emotional harmony. The final prayers and collective chanting of *nāma* dissolve the boundary between the performer and the devotee, completing the aesthetic cycle of awakening, purification, and transcendence.

Śaṅkaradeva's genius lay in his ability to harmonize classical aesthetics with local spiritual practice, transforming *rasa* theory into a living philosophy of emotion. The *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* thus becomes a theatre of feeling where every sensory experience- sound, gesture,

rhythm, and colour- is directed toward spiritual fulfillment. The aesthetic of restraint (*niyama*), simplicity, and inner concentration ensures that *rasa* leads not to excitement but to contemplation. As Mahanta (2025) aptly concludes, the highest art in Śaṅkaradeva's vision is not imitation of life but realization of the divine; *bhakti-rasa* is art's ultimate truth (xv-xxv).

In this integration of emotion and enlightenment, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* achieves what few performance traditions have- a state where aesthetics becomes theology and the human act of performance becomes a mirror of divine joy.

Ethical and social dimensions of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*

While *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* is primarily a devotional theatre, its philosophical essence extends beyond the spiritual and aesthetic domains into the ethical and social life of Assam. Conceived by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva not merely as a form of art but as an instrument of social transformation, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* embodies the integration of *bhakti*, *dharma*, and *sevā*-devotion, morality, and service. It is a theatre of the people and for the people, designed to cultivate moral refinement, communal harmony, and spiritual awakening through collective performance.

At the heart of Śaṅkaradeva's theatre lies the conviction that art must serve an ethical purpose. His *Aṅkīyā-bhāonās*- including *Kāliya-damana*, *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, and *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*- were written not merely to dramatize mythological events but to communicate moral truths embedded within Vaiṣṇavite philosophy. As Maheśvara Neog (1965) notes, Śaṅkaradeva's theatre reflects the union of aesthetics with ethics, where beauty becomes the vehicle of moral realization. Through the visual and emotional medium of drama, he translated abstract virtues such as humility, compassion, and righteousness into tangible experiences accessible to both literate and illiterate audiences.

For *Śaṅkaradeva*, moral education was inseparable from emotional purification. The theatre became a school of ethics, where the discipline of the body, voice, and mind cultivated inner harmony. The actor's restraint in movement, the precision of rhythm, and the control of voice reflected not only artistic training but also spiritual discipline (*sādhanā*). The performer in *bhāonā* does not act to impress but to serve; performance itself becomes an ethical offering. In this sense, Śaṅkaradeva transformed theatre into ethical praxis- a performative path of self-realization.

In medieval Assam, the social order was rigidly hierarchical, structured around caste and ritual privilege. Śaṅkaradeva's religious reform, expressed through *nāma-kīrtana* and *bhāonā*, challenged these divisions by creating a democratic space of worship. His performance tradition invited participation from all social strata- Brāhmaṇas, artisans, peasants, and tribal groups alike. The *nāmghar* (village prayer hall), which also functioned as the *bhāonā-mañca* (performance space), became a symbol of egalitarian spirituality where community members gathered without distinction of caste or wealth. The act of sitting together, singing together, and witnessing divine play (*līlā*) together dissolved social hierarchies through emotional communion. Thus, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* served as a cultural model of collective ethics grounded in *bhakti*.

Even in modern times, this spirit persists in community festivals such as the Bāreśahariyā Bhāonā at Biśvanāth Cāriāli, where hundreds of performers and thousands of

villagers participate voluntarily in multi-day performances. Madan Sarma and Parasmoni Dutta (2009) observe that the performance transforms the entire village into a moral and spiritual congregation, where the boundaries between actor and audience vanish in the rhythm of devotion (305). This participatory nature reveals how *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* continues to function as a living ethical ritual- a performative embodiment of unity and shared moral consciousness.

One of the most profound aspects of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy is his identification of performance with *sevā*- service to God through disciplined devotion. Every action within *Bhāonā*- from the playing of the *khol* to the chanting of *nāma*- is considered an act of *sevā*. This transforms aesthetic discipline into ethical discipline.

The *gāyana-bāyana*, for instance, embody not only musical skill but moral integrity. Their synchronized rhythms and bodily coordination symbolize the harmony of human cooperation under divine will. As Richmond (1974) notes, the unity of the chorus in Assamese Vaiṣṇavite theatre serves as a metaphor for moral order, where discipline is devotion and rhythm is righteousness (152). The precision of gesture, timing, and collective movement thus becomes a moral metaphor- each participant aligning the self with the cosmic rhythm of *dharma*.

This principle of ethical discipline extends to the actor's training and behaviour. The performer must cultivate humility, truthfulness, and emotional control, embodying the moral code (*sāttvikatā*) central to Śaṅkaradeva's spiritual aesthetics. The suppression of ego (*ahaṅkāra*)- whether of the artist or spectator- is essential for the experience of *bhakti-rasa*. Śaṅkaradeva's art teaches self-restraint as beauty and service as the highest form of aesthetic fulfilment.

Beyond individual ethics, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* also plays a crucial social role in the cultural and moral life of Assam. Each performance acts as a communal gathering for moral instruction, emotional catharsis, and spiritual rejuvenation. The stories drawn from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or *Rāmāyaṇa* are interpreted not as distant mythology but as ethical allegories reflecting human virtues and vices.

For instance, in *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, Satyabhāmā's pride represents human ego, while her eventual surrender to Kṛṣṇa symbolizes the triumph of humility. Similarly, *Kāliya-damana* dramatizes the victory of moral order over evil impulses. The moral clarity of these narratives serves pedagogical purposes, allowing audiences to internalize ethical values through aesthetic enjoyment. The moral content of *bhāonā* was its most enduring social instrument- it redefined religion as ethical behaviour in everyday life.

The participatory nature of *bhāonā*- where the audience joins in singing, clapping, and chanting- extends moral engagement beyond observation to collective enactment. The entire village becomes a theatre of devotion and ethics, where moral principles are not preached but performed. The sense of unity produced through rhythm and chorus instils what Sarma and Dutta (2009) call "a social *rasa* of belonging" (310). In this way, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* transforms the community into a moral organism, bound by shared feeling and discipline.

Even today, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* retains its didactic and ethical potency. In a world marked by moral fragmentation and materialism, the *bhāonā*'s values of simplicity, harmony, and humility offer a spiritual counterbalance. Its communal character reminds society that morality

is not an individual abstraction but a collective rhythm. The performance becomes a social ritual where aesthetic joy and ethical insight converge- each reinforcing the other.

Thus, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* exemplifies Śaṅkaradeva's profound belief that aesthetic pleasure without moral content is hollow and religious piety without aesthetic refinement is lifeless. By harmonizing devotion, discipline, and community, Śaṅkaradeva transformed theatre into an ethical institution- a living scripture of moral action. His legacy persists not merely in performance but in the everyday values of Assamese life, where *bhakti* continues to shape ethics and *bhāonā* continues to shape humanity.

Conclusion

The artistic and spiritual legacy of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva stands as one of the most profound syntheses of religion, aesthetics, and performance in Indian cultural history. Through the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, Śaṅkaradeva realized a vision where *bhakti* (devotion) becomes the source of beauty and beauty becomes the expression of truth. His theatre represents an extraordinary experiment in transforming spiritual philosophy into artistic experience- an art that teaches, refines, and uplifts. In his hands, drama ceased to be a mere imitation of life and became a mirror of divine consciousness, uniting emotion, discipline, and ethics into a complete spiritual aesthetic.

At its philosophical core, Śaṅkaradeva's work is grounded in *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*, the faith of single-minded devotion to one God. This theology of love finds expression in the *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*, where every word, gesture, and rhythm serves as an act of worship. The classical aesthetic theory of *rasa* is here transformed into *bhakti-rasa*- the emotional realization of divine joy. Through his adaptation of *Nāṭyaśāstra* principles and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* devotion, Śaṅkaradeva established an aesthetic system that integrates feeling, morality, and transcendence.

The performative grammar of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā*- the *pūrvaraṅga*, *Sūtradhāra*, *gāyana-bāyana*, and *abhinaya*- embodies this synthesis of the sacred and the aesthetic. Every element functions symbolically: the rhythmic patterns of the *khol* and *tāla* purify the atmosphere; the *Sūtradhāra* bridges human and divine consciousness; the gestures and chants enact a sacred dialogue of emotion. The artist's discipline itself becomes a form of *sādhanā* (spiritual practice), and the spectator's participation becomes meditation. Theatre thus becomes a performative theology- a ritual of moral purification and emotional enlightenment.

The ethical and social dimensions of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* reveal Śaṅkaradeva's genius as a cultural reformer. His plays were not designed for a privileged few but for all- irrespective of caste, literacy, or gender. The *nāmghar* and *sattra*, which served as both prayer halls and performance spaces, created a democratic stage of spirituality, where collective worship replaced ritual hierarchy. In this sense, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* became a social scripture, teaching ethical virtues such as humility, compassion, and truth through the language of art.

Even centuries after its creation, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* remains dynamically alive- adapted to modern contexts yet faithful to its spiritual essence. The contemporary revival of the form in both rural festivals and international stages illustrates its capacity for renewal.

The enduring vitality of *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* attests to its power as a spiritual ecology- a living balance between art, ethics, and devotion. In a world increasingly fractured by

materialism and alienation, Śaṅkaradeva's aesthetic philosophy offers a way back to inner harmony and social cohesion. His theatre continues to remind us that performance is not a diversion but a revelation: a means to experience the divine through the discipline of beauty. In conclusion, *Aṅkīyā-bhāonā* stands as a complete manifestation of Śaṅkaradeva's integrated vision of *bhakti*, aesthetics, and performance. It is at once a sacred ritual, a work of art, and a moral dialogue- a theatre that educates, transforms, and unites. Through the centuries, it has remained a beacon of Assamese cultural identity and a universal expression of spiritual humanity. As the lamps of the *maṅikūṭa* flicker and the sound of the *khol* resounds across the *nāmghar*, Śaṅkaradeva's message endures: that true art is devotion and true devotion is beauty.

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Locating Women in Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti* Movement

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Abstract

Women's voices in the making of history have long been silenced in mainstream historiography. Based on a critical understanding of the history of the *Bhakti* Movement in India, the paper argues that *bhakti* acted as an emancipatory force for women through which women could challenge patriarchy and find alternative spaces for their existence. The narratives of women *bhakti* saints of medieval India reveal that women saints—including the women legends of the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva—played a pivotal role in disseminating the message of *bhakti* through their writings and activism, and challenged caste hierarchy and gender exclusion.

The paper further argues that although the *Bhakti* Movement of Śaṅkaradeva gave rise to a democratic space for women, caste-based practices by some *Satras* and other socio-cultural religious organisations during the post-Śaṅkaradeva period resulted in the marginalisation of women within the religious institutions of the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition in contemporary Assam. Significantly, the prohibition of women's entry into the *kīrtan-ghara* of some *satras* is a clear indication of the reinforcement of Brāhmaṇical patriarchy and the distortion of the original *Mahāpuruṣīyā* ideology based on equality, compassion, and universal humanism.

Keywords: *Bhakti*, *Mahāpuruṣīyā*, women, *kīrtan-ghara*, *satra*, Śaṅkaradeva.

Introduction:

Our understanding of the past has been primarily elitist and male-biased, wherein women's voices have been silenced in mainstream of historical discourse. Like men, women have always been actors and agents of history and have been central to the making of society and the building of civilisation (Lerner 4). In India, women have played a significant role in the making of the history of gender equality through the medium of religion. The history of equality and emancipation of women after long years

of subjugation and servility can be said to have had its beginnings in the religious sphere and in the *bhakti* traditions (Rukmani 64- 66).

The *Bhakti* Movement has been regarded as a democratising movement grounded in a questioning of orthodox and repressive Brāhmaṇical Hinduism. This movement made it possible for lower castes and women to articulate their religious aspirations, emphasising devotion (*bhakti*) and love- not knowledge- as the primary means of salvation (Punekar 123-24). Since religious space was one of the few accessible public spheres available to women, many women embraced *bhakti*. This movement gave them the freedom to express their own truths, enabling them to challenge and re-imagine society, politics, relationships, and religion in their own voices (Pande, *Divine Sounds* 202). Eventually, it empowered women to speak against patriarchy and to create alternative spaces for their own existence.

The *Bhakti* Movement of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) resulted in the democratisation of religion in Assam. He took a revolutionary step by situating *strī* (women) and *śūdra* at par with the rest of society in his new religious order. He inspired marginalised communities and women to recognise their own humanity and dignity (Gohain, *Asomiyā Jātiya Jīvanat* 95). Historical accounts highlight the prominent roles of women, including those from lower castes, in significant positions within the *bhakti* tradition of Śaṅkaradeva, popularly known as the *Mahāpuruṣīya* tradition.

During the post-Śaṅkaradeva period, the *Mahāpuruṣīya* fold was subdivided into four sects (*samhatis*)- *Nikā*, *Puruṣa*, *Kāla*, and *Brahma*. *Nikā-samhati* emphasised strict discipline in respect of food, dress, manners, and all religious matters (Sarma 98). *Puruṣa-samhati* laid special emphasis on *nāma*, i.e. chanting and singing in praise of God, and attempted to retain the original features of Śaṅkaradeva's faith (Neog, *Early History* 155). *Kāla-samhati* emphasised the softening of caste distinctions. *Brahma-samhati* represented a Brāhmaṇised form of the *Mahāpuruṣīya* faith (Neog, *Early History* 154). Dāmodaradeva, the founder of this *samhati*, did not agree to abandon caste-based rituals or to limit religious practices solely to *nāma-kīrtana* (Roychoudhury 99).

In course of time, the *satras* began to receive revenue-free land grants on a massive scale under state patronage- both during the Āhom and Colonial periods- and, as a consequence, attained a feudal character in terms of power relations between the Sattrādhikārs and the *bhaktas* (Sharma, *Asomiyā Jātigathan* 58–62). Meanwhile, *Brahma-samhati* became the most influential among the *satras* of Assam, and many *satras* gradually adopted Brāhmaṇism and became pillars of the caste system (Gohain,

Labyrinth 1972). This process led to the marginalisation of women's space within the *Mahāpuruṣīya* tradition.

This paper examines the location of women in the *Bhakti* Movement of Śaṅkaradeva and interrogates women's space within the *Mahāpuruṣīya* tradition in the present-day context.

Approaches to the study of *bhakti* and the *Bhakti* Movement:

As the *Bhakti* Movement is a multifaceted phenomenon, one must exercise caution in employing theoretical frameworks for its study. The current academic definition of *bhakti* is based on the assumption that *bhakti* constitutes a specific religious mode characterised by belief in and emotional attachment to a personal God. However, critical investigations of the *Bhakti* Movement suggest that this definition- formulated by a group of Western Indologists in the nineteenth century as part of their analysis of Hinduism- is problematic. Their conception of *bhakti* was inadequately grounded, as it was not substantiated by careful engagement with *bhakti* traditions themselves. Their understanding was primarily derived from studies of the history and theology of Vaiṣṇavism. Since Vaiṣṇavism does not represent the sole origin of *bhakti* traditions, such approaches may lead to erroneous interpretations of the *Bhakti* Movement.

Certain theoretical positions have also suggested links between *bhakti* and Islamic traditions. This correlation has two principal bases: first, the idea of a personal God, common to both traditions; and second, emotionalism, simplicity of faith, and the spirit of surrender that characterise both Islamic and *bhakti* traditions.

Marxist scholars have interpreted the *Bhakti* Movement in two opposing directions. On the one hand, it has been explained as an ideology supportive of the feudal order; on the other, it has been viewed as a revolt of the lower classes. It is indeed a historical fact that the *bhakti* saints such as Kabīr, Dādū, Raidāsa, and Nāmadeva belonged to lower castes and openly challenged the caste system. However, at the same time, several leading saints emerged from higher caste backgrounds as well. For example, Caitanya, Tulasīdāsa, and Sūrdāsa were Brāhmaṇas, while Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was a Kāyastha. Whereas R. S. Sharma interprets the *Bhakti* Movement as a reflection of the contemporary feudal order, Irfan Habib identifies within it the seeds of class conflict leading to social mobility (Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement* 1-31).

In the context of the *Bhakti* Movement of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the term *Mahāpuruṣīyā* appears to be the most appropriate conceptual category for the study of Assam's *bhakti* tradition. The term *Mahāpuruṣīyā* does not merely denote Vaiṣṇava, *satriyā*, or *Śaṅkarī* traditions; rather, it refers to the essential ideological features of

Śaṅkaradeva as reflected in his writings and works- such as liberal outlook, compassion, and inclusive humanism (Gohain, *Asomiyā Jātiya Jīvanat*).

This study employs gender as a conceptual tool to examine women's roles in the *Bhakti* Movement of India and to locate women's space within the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition in contemporary Assam. Historically, within male-dominated patriarchal societies, religion has functioned as a powerful instrument through which women's subordination has been legitimised. In patriarchy, women's general subordination becomes necessary as a mechanism of control over women's sexuality. This mechanism has historically operated through the internalisation of ideologies such as *strī-dharma* and *pativratā-dharma* (Chakravarti, *Conceptualising* 579-82).

Genesis of the *Bhakti* Movement:

Historically, India has been the land of *sāadhanā*, and it belongs to her innermost spiritual core. A remarkable feature of this *sāadhanā* is that it does not flow solely from scriptures nor is it controlled by social laws of any kind. Most *sādhakas* emerged from the masses, and whatever they realised and expressed was not through intellectual abstraction or extensive scriptural learning (Tagore i-ii). These *sādhakas* sought life's fulfilment in a love that transcends the boundaries of creed, custom, caste, and race. *Bhakti* represents the manifestation of this *sāadhanā*, grounded in an ideology of love for humanity.

As a concept, *bhakti* first evolved in South India with the hymns of the Vaiṣṇava Āḷvārs and Śaiva Nāyaṅārs, and gradually developed into a movement challenging Brāhmaṇical domination. From there, it spread westward and northward, and eventually into eastern and north-eastern regions of India. Significantly, by affirming that God dwells in all- high and low alike and by rejecting book-learning as the sole means of reaching God, the *Bhakti* Movement opened its doors not only to so-called low-status groups but also to women. The shift in the language of worship from Sanskrit to the vernacular languages of the common people created new opportunities for women to express themselves in devotional literature (Pande, *Divine Sounds* 8). As a result, a number of women *bhaktas* were getting the liberty of self-expression for the first time, through their *Bhakti* poetry. Most of these women were very revolutionary and opposed the institution of marriage and family itself (Pande, *Bhakti Movement* 219). The women *bhaktas* of South India- such as Bahīṅābāī, Muktabāī, Avvai, and Akkā Mahādevī- demonstrated remarkable grit and determination in overcoming obstacles both within and beyond the household. Bahīṅābāī, a woman saint of the Vārkarī tradition of Mahārāṣṭra, raised her voice through her poems against discriminatory attitudes toward women in Vedic traditions. Muktabāī, another saint of the same tradition, questioned the injustices

of the caste system through her *abhaṅgas* (Marathi devotional songs) at a very young age. Avvai, a *bhakti* saint of Karnataka, is said to have transformed herself into an old woman in order to pursue her spiritual path and social activism without the hindrance of marriage.

In Rājasthān, the figure of Mīrābāī stands out as a saint, mystic, and fervent devotee of Kṛṣṇa, known for rebelling against the traditional duties of a wife and leaving her husband's home to join other *bhaktas* (Rukmani 57-65). Akkā Mahādevī, the finest woman Vacana writer from Karnataka- a genre of short, free-verse Kannada prose-poems- raised her voice against age-old barriers between the sexes and envisioned a world of total socio-cultural equality (Shankar 1).

Through *bhakti*, women retrieved some of the ground they had lost within the Brāhmaṇical ritual order based on the notions of purity and pollution that confined them within the four walls of the household. *Bhakti* also enabled women to chant the name of God even during menstruation and to break Brāhmaṇical marital norms founded upon the ideology of *pativrata-dharma* (Chakravarti, *World of the Bhaktin* 28). Thus, medieval women saints sought to get rid of patriarchy and demands of domesticity by creating an autonomous space (Pande, *Women's Voice* 68).

Women in the *Bhakti* Movement of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva:

A critical investigation of Śaṅkaradeva's ideological orientations suggests that his liberal outlook toward women facilitated their inclusion in the *Bhakti* Movement. It is common to trace the origins of *bhakti* to the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. In these two central texts, *bhakti* often remains ideologically subservient to the interests of the dominant intelligentsia and ruling classes even during periods of social crisis.

Rāmānuja did not consider the Vedas alone to be the "Word of God"; instead, he accorded higher status to the *Prabandhams* of the Āḷvāra saints. This elevation of *Prabandham* constituted a challenge to the monopoly of the Brāhmaṇical intelligentsia. Śaṅkarācārya's *Advaita* philosophy removed social differences only at the transcendent level, while in practice he insisted on enforcing them in everyday life. In contrast, Rāmānuja's *bhakti* prescribed charity to the oppressed and injured and thus appeared more progressive than Śaṅkarācārya's doctrine. Nevertheless, Rāmānuja neither raised his voice in favour of *strī* (women) and *śūdras* nor challenged Brāhmaṇical ritual supremacy, and he preserved the dominant status of Sanskrit.

Rāmānanda, despite being a follower of Rāmānuja, opened the doors of *bhakti* to all castes and professions. His prominent followers abandoned Sanskrit altogether and promoted *bhāṣā*, the language of the people. They overturned Brāhmaṇical supremacy

and allowed spiritual authority to any genuine *bhakta* irrespective of caste (Gohain, *Labyrinth* 1971). Kabīr likewise spoke against the monopoly of Sanskrit, Vedic ritualism, and its practitioners- the Brāhmaṇas. Kabīr stated: “O Kabīr, Sanskrit is the water of a well, while *bhāṣās* are the waters of a flowing stream” (Sen 98). With Rāmānanda and Kabīr, we witness a paradigmatic shift- from ritual purity to spiritual purity.

Ideologically, Śaṅkaradeva stands closer to Rāmānanda and Kabīr than to Śaṅkarācārya and Rāmānuja. Like other *bhakti* saints, Śaṅkaradeva accepted the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* as his principal scriptural authority, yet he adopted a markedly liberal position regarding caste. Śaṅkaradeva preached gender equality, a principle reflected in several of his writings. Although certain feminist scholars have criticised his works as being biased against women, such critiques often overlook passages that clearly articulate his egalitarian views. For instance, in his *Bhāgavata* translation he states: “Even if women and *śūdras* offer devotion to Me, O noble-minded one, impart to them My knowledge” (Nath 330).

Śaṅkaradeva articulated his theory of *bhakti* most fully in his magnum opus, the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. In the section “Vaikuṅṭha Prayāṇa” (Kṛṣṇa’s Departure to Vaikuṅṭha), he categorically states that no discrimination should be made on the basis of caste, creed, or gender.

The *Uttarakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* offers further testimony to Śaṅkaradeva’s liberal outlook toward women. His portrayal of Sītā in this work is unique and innovative. Sītā is presented as an open-minded and courageous woman who questions oppressive patriarchy (Goswami). She emerges as a feminist voice of protest by transcending the traditional role of the *pativrātā*. In the final scene of the *Uttarakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*, she rejects Rāma’s proposal to accept her back after subjecting her to another ordeal by fire. Her concluding speech contains words of condemnation that would have found no place in Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Sītā is portrayed as a submissive *pativrātā* well-versed in *strī-dharma*. She even refers to Rāma as “Yamakāla,” the very embodiment of the Lord of Death (Misra 26–27).

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva also developed socio-cultural strategies that paved the way for an inclusive society. He composed numerous literary works that stimulated the growth of learning and literature in Assam. Despite being an accomplished Sanskrit scholar, he predominantly employed vernacular languages- the living speech of the people- in his writings. This had two significant consequences: knowledge previously confined to Sanskrit became accessible to the uneducated masses, and the hegemony of Brāhmaṇas over Sanskrit learning was weakened. He developed art forms such as painting, dance,

and drama as vehicles for disseminating his ideology of love among the masses. He also introduced community prayer and communal dining, fostering social interaction and solidarity among people of different social strata.

Nāmghars represent one of Śaṅkaradeva's most innovative creations. His revolutionary ideals are embedded in the architecture and sculpture of the *nāmghar* itself (Agarwala 467–68). *Nāmghars* functioned as public platforms where people of all sections of society- including women- could gather for collective worship irrespective of social distinctions. They embody the praxis of his progressive ideology: that every individual has an equal right to worship God. This inclusive vision led to the democratisation of religion and facilitated the integration of women into Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* fold. By participating in *nāma-kīrtana*, women carved out a public space within patriarchal social structures.

Historical accounts highlight the prominent roles of women- including those from lower castes- within the *bhakti* or Mahāpuruṣīya tradition. Narratives of women legends such as Kālīndī Āī, Śānti Rādhikā, Sumatī Āī, Āī Padmāpriyā, and Āī Kanakalatā testify to women's integral participation in Śaṅkaradeva's movement. During Śaṅkaradeva's eighteen- year residence at Pāṭhāusī, and following his later departure to Kūc Bihār, his wife Kālīndī Āī played a crucial role in spreading *bhakti* in the Barpetā region. Śānti Rādhikā, belonging to the Kaivarta caste, assisted Śaṅkaradeva in constructing a dam to protect Alipukhurī (Bardowā) from floodwaters flowing from the Tembuwānī *jāna* (Neog *Guru-carita* 24–25). Sumatī Āī, wife of Māthuradāsa Buḍhā Āṭā and a descendant of Mādhavadeva, safeguarded the *akṣaya-bantī* when the *Raṅgiyāl Gṛha* (prayer hall) of Barpetā caught fire. Along with other women devotees, she erected a temporary shelter and resumed daily *nāma-kīrtana* (Bezbaroa 181). Āī Padmāpriyā, the first Assamese woman poet, composed devotional songs expressing strong protest against patriarchal domination. In the early seventeenth century, Āī Kanakalatā, the granddaughter-in-law of Śaṅkaradeva, arrived at Bordowā with 126 *bhaktas* to rediscover Śaṅkaradeva's birthplace (Bora 16).

Despite these significant contributions, questions of gender and women's roles within the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition remained underexplored. Ironically, narratives of these women legends are either absent or only loosely integrated into mainstream of *bhakti* discourse (Bora 4-5).

The contemporary scene:

As stated earlier, under the influence of *Brahma-saṁhati*, several *satrās* adopted caste-based discriminatory practices during the post-Śaṅkaradeva period, leading to the

marginalisation of women in the religious life of Assam. Ironically, such practices continue to prevail in many *sattrās* of Assam even today. For instance, in several *sattrās*, women's access to the *kīrtan-ghara* has been restricted. Beyond the *sattras*, numerous *Mahāpuruṣīyā* socio-cultural and religious organisations in Assam continue to exclude women from leadership roles, both spiritual and administrative¹.

The prohibition of women's entry into the *kīrtan-ghara* (central prayer hall) of Barpetā Satra has recently become a subject of public debate. The central prayer hall is reserved exclusively for male *bhakatas*. *Bhakatanīs* (women devotees) are permitted to perform *nāma-kīrtana* only in the *bārāndā*, outside the main hall. Ironically, this assigned space for women's daily *nāma-prasaṅga* is named *Sumatī Āī Prasaṅga-sthāna*. According to official sources of the *satra*, this prohibition is maintained in conformity with the "*paramparā*"(tradition) of Barpetā Satra. Although women activists and civil society organisations have repeatedly protested against this restriction, the *Satra* authorities have remained firm in their stance.

The authorities claim that the ban on women's entry forms part of the *satra's paramparā* and that the people of Barpetā- including women- support its preservation. Certain narratives further argue that since Mādhavadeva, associated with the Barpetā Satra, was a celibate (*udāsīn*), women's presence might compromise the "purity" of the *kīrtan-ghara*, and thus the "no entry" rule became established as a tradition. However, given that women have been integral participants in the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition since the time of Śāṅkaradeva, such claims appear misleading. Scholars have observed that this form of gender-based discrimination is a product of patriarchal social influence and runs directly contrary to Śāṅkaradeva's original egalitarian ideology (Saikia 36).

Conclusion:

Bhakti is fundamentally a religion of love. By propagating an ideology of love, medieval *bhakti* saints brought religion to the downtrodden, including women. A critical study of the *Bhakti* Movement indicates that *bhakti* created alternative spaces for women grounded in the belief that all are equal in the eyes of God and that every individual is capable of realising the divine. Through *bhakti*, women acquired the courage to redefine

¹ Although numerous *Mahāpuruṣīyā* socio-cultural and religious organisations in Assam continue to exclude women from leadership roles, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha grants women equal status with their male counterparts in all religious and administrative matters, without any distinction or bias. The *Sangha* was established in 1930 with the principal objective of disseminating the true tenets and messages of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śāṅkaradeva, and to unify and reorganize the various institutions and organisations that follow Srimanta Sankaradeva as *Guru*. -Editor.

society, culture, and politics, and to negotiate their own spaces within patriarchal social structures.

Due to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's liberal outlook, women became integral participants in the *Bhakti* Movement in Assam. Although women *bhakti* saints of Assam played significant roles in Śaṅkaradeva's movement, narratives concerning these women legends remain silent in the mainstream of *bhakti* discourse. Hence, there is a pressing need to revisit the history of the *Bhakti* Movement from a gendered perspective in order to develop a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the past.

Ironically, in contradiction to Śaṅkaradeva's original egalitarian ideology, Brāhmaṇism continues to remain an influential force within certain *satras* and other *Mahāpuruṣīyā* institutions, leading to the marginalisation of women's space and the distortion of Śaṅkaradeva's vision. Critical engagement with *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition and sustained social activism has thus become necessary in order to restore the *Mahāpuruṣīyā* tradition in its original inclusive form.

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Constructing the Ideal Wife A Gendered Reading of *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*

- Drishti Narayan *

Abstract

This paper examines the *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* to understand how the character of Sitā is gradually shaped to absorb patriarchal values into her moral consciousness. While the play's religious framework has received wide scholarly attention, its engagement with gender has received limited critical attention. A close reading of key moments shows that Sitā's sense of self develops not through explicit patriarchal commands alone but through the repeated affirmation of virtues such as patience, chastity, and endurance, which are presented as moral ideals. The episode of abandonment, initiated by Rama and communicated through Lakṣmana, reveals how patriarchal authority is aligned with the notion of dharma, leaving little space for dissent. Sitā's composed acceptance of this decision reflects the depth of her internalisation of these norms over time. Her final return to the earth, therefore, functions as more than a narrative conclusion; it symbolises the culmination of a life shaped by prolonged discipline in obedience. Taken together, these elements suggest that the play ultimately reinforces dominant cultural values by constructing the ideal woman through submission, endurance, and self-sacrifice.

Keywords: patriarchy, identity, chastity, obedience, Śaṅkaradeva.

Introduction

Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa stands within a centuries-old performance tradition that has shaped the cultural and religious imagination of Assam. As part of the *Ankīyā Nāṭa* repertoire associated with the neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the play is inseparable from the devotional world that produced it. Early scholars, such as Maheswar Neog, have demonstrated how Śaṅkaradeva and his followers utilised drama not as ornamentation but as a teaching instrument, something that could convey scriptural stories and ethical lessons into the public sphere. Because these plays were intended for performance in Satras and Nāmghars, they were woven into the everyday rhythms of community life. That background is essential for understanding why characters in *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*, and Sitā in particular, are portrayed in ways that extend beyond the literary to touch on lived moral behaviour.

Sitā's presence in this play is shaped by a long history of retelling the Rāmāyaṇa across regions and languages. Still, her role gains a particular colouring when placed in the Vaishnavite setting. In many traditions across South Asia, Sitā embodies devotion, purity, and quiet strength, and Assamese sources draw on these familiar associations. Yet *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* does more than simply repeat inherited imagery. Through its carefully

choreographed movement, its musical patterning, and ritual framing, the play turns Sitā into a figure through which viewers are invited to reflect on what moral steadfastness looks like. Her grief, her endurance, her careful self-control, these are emphasised not as private emotions but as outward signs of a larger ethical ideal that Vaishnavite communities hold in high regard.

To grasp the significance of this portrayal, it is essential to consider the space in which the play is typically performed. *Satras* and *nāmghars* are not ordinary stages. They are religious centres governed by specific codes of conduct and a shared understanding of how devotional life should be lived. Scholars writing on the *Satra* system have described how these institutions cultivate discipline: through daily rituals, communal singing, strict behavioural expectations, and a sense of collective responsibility. Within such an environment, the characters who appear in *Ankīyā-nāṭa* are not interpreted as distant literary figures but as exemplars of virtues that individuals are expected to strive toward. This performs an intensity that is difficult to capture in text alone. When Sitā bows her head or speaks softly, these gestures are not merely dramatic embellishments; they carry moral weight.

Research on the portrayal of Sitā in regional *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings reveals that her character varies significantly. In some Northeast traditions, she takes on divine or assertive qualities, while in many classical versions, she is emphasised as the devoted, self-effacing wife whose virtue lies in her endurance. The Assamese Vaishnavite perspective tends to align with the latter. In this context, Sitā's loyalty, her quiet acceptance of hardship, and her unwavering commitment to dharma are framed as moral virtues that are both admirable and instructive. Her character becomes a lens through which the community defines its expectations of womanhood.

Although scholarship has recognised these broad tendencies, there remains a noticeable absence of detailed work on how *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* specifically frames Sitā and the implications this has for the devotional community. Much of the existing literature either treats the play as part of a general Śāṅkaradevian corpus or discusses Sitā in abstract terms without attention to the particularities of Assamese performance practice. What is missing is a study that links the play's textual choices, its performative conventions, and the institutional environment of Vaishnavite worship to the formation of a certain image of feminine virtue.

This research, therefore, aims to examine how *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* presents Sitā as a figure who embodies and internalises the moral expectations of patriarchal dharma. By tracing how the play stages her suffering, her silence, and her steadfast devotion, the study seeks to show how these elements cohere into a culturally recognisable ideal. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Assamese devotional performance shapes, reinforces, and circulates gendered moral values.

Research objectives and methodology

The objective of this study is to analyse how *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* constructs Sitā's gendered identity through repeated performative acts of obedience, chastity, endurance, and self-effacement, and to interpret these representations using Judith Butler's theory of

gender performativity. The study further aims to examine how disciplinary power, social surveillance, and moral authority operate within the text to shape Sitā's internalisation of patriarchal dharma, drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of power and subject formation. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative textual analysis of *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*, combining close reading with discourse analysis to identify recurring gestures, speech patterns, and narrative structures through which gender and discipline are enacted. Butler's and Foucault's theoretical frameworks are used as interpretive tools to analyse the intersections of gender, devotion, and power within the Vaishnavite cultural context of the play.

Gender and the question of performativity

Approaching Sitā's portrayal in *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* requires a framework that can account for how gendered behaviour is shaped, repeated, and eventually taken for granted within a cultural setting. Judith Butler's idea of performativity offers an entry point into this conversation. Butler's argument, that gender is constructed through continual acts rather than discovered as a pre-existing truth, helps clarify why Sitā appears the way she does in the play (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178-179). Her gestures, her muted emotional register, the careful way she expresses loyalty or grief, all work together to present her as the "ideal woman." These actions are not simply personal traits. They are recognisable patterns that draw upon a much older moral vocabulary surrounding womanhood in Vaishnavite culture. *Ankīyā-nāṭa*'s highly stylised dramatic form, with its emphasis on ritualised movement and devotional tone, strengthens this impression by foregrounding Sitā's conduct as something exemplary rather than incidental.

Yet performance alone does not explain why Sitā's actions carry the force of moral obligation. For that, it is useful to turn to Michel Foucault's reflections on power and the shaping of subjects. Foucault emphasises that power becomes most effective when it is no longer experienced as coercion but as part of the ordinary expectations of life. Public scrutiny, the pressure to adhere to shared codes, and the sense that one's virtue is tied to compliance are all mechanisms through which societies cultivate disciplined individuals (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 170). In the play, the murmurs of doubt around Sitā's purity and the invocation of dharma create exactly such a climate. They produce a world in which Sitā's obedience seems not only expected but ethically required. Her acceptance of exile, then, can be read as the culmination of this disciplinary environment: an outcome shaped as much by internalised norms as by external command (Śaṅkaradeva 35-36).

However, relying solely on Foucault risks flattening certain dimensions of the text. His framework does not address the emotional textures that animate the relationship between Rama and Sitā, feelings of affection, sorrow, and mutual regard that are woven into the narrative. These emotions complicate a straightforward reading of discipline and remind us that Sitā's choices unfold within a network of intimate ties as well as social pressures (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 135).

With Butler and Foucault in conversation, the study aims to understand Sitā's position in a way that acknowledges both the cultural scripts she enacts and the emotional world through which she interprets them (Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Foucault, *Discipline and*

Punish). This combined approach makes it possible to see how gender, authority, devotion, and feeling intersect in the play, shaping Sitā's sense of duty and the limited space available to her within the moral universe of *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*.

Performative production of femininity

The representation of Sitā in *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* emerges through a set of carefully patterned gestures, emotional attitudes, and devotional practices that together consolidate a particular model of idealised womanhood within the Vaishnavite cultural world. Rather than presenting Sitā as a character whose qualities simply unfold through narrative progression, the play repeatedly stages her obedience, chastity, and endurance as actions that must be continually performed. These acts, over time, assume the weight of inevitability. This cumulative staging aligns closely with Judith Butler's understanding of gender as a phenomenon produced through repeated citation rather than innate essence (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). In this context, Sitā is not so much revealed as constructed, shaped through a dramaturgy that treats femininity itself as a disciplined performance.

From her earliest appearance, the play frames Sitā through a moral vocabulary that insists on purity and suffering as the principal coordinates of her identity. This construction begins even before she speaks, as the narrator introduces her not as a dynamic agent, but as an aestheticised object, likening her shimmering body to that of a golden doll. By framing her through the image of a golden doll, the text establishes a template of fixed, idealised perfection. Terms such as purity and endurance do not operate as neutral descriptors but as ideological cues that prepare the audience to read Sitā within an already familiar template of virtuous femininity. The conventions of *Ankīyā-nāṭa* amplify this positioning; its stylised choreography, specifically the graceful, measured movement with which she enters the stage, works to transform Sitā's identity into a repertoire of recognisable, repeatable acts. Because these gestures recur across performances, they take on the force of cultural precedent; what the audience perceives as her inherent virtue is inseparable from the theatrical techniques that reproduce it.

Chastity, in particular, becomes a public performance rather than an internal state. The play persistently situates Sitā within contexts of suspicion and moral ambiguity, such as the sudden arrival of the fierce Paraśurāma, where her responses function less as assertions of innocence than as ritualised enactments of vulnerability: "What cruel trick has fate played" (Śaṅkaradeva 38)

When she cries out, her distress follows a prescribed aesthetic of the agitation expected of a virtuous wife. This vocalisation of despair, paired with the physical act of rolling on the ground, is a recurring motif in the *Ankīyā-nāṭa* tradition, rendering her suffering a performative condition that demands continual reiteration. Through the repeated stylisation of this grief, Sitā comes to embody the very essence of purity.

Obedience is framed with similar care. Sitā's deference is expressed not only through explicit acts of compliance but also through the consistent restraint of her body and voice. Silence becomes a moral attribute rather than a circumstantial choice. The dramaturgy allocates speech and authority primarily to male characters, while Sitā's presence is marked by emotional endurance and diminished verbal agency. This unequal distribution of voice is a

subtle yet decisive means of reinforcing gendered hierarchies: it ties femininity to quiet acceptance, while reason and command remains the domain of men.

What emerges, then, is not merely a reflection of patriarchal cultural norms but a theatrical process that helps sustain them. By aestheticising Sitā's suffering and obedience, the play converts subordination into a moral exemplar, inviting audiences to internalise these behaviours as cultural ideals. Sitā's gendered identity, therefore, functions less as a narrative role and more as a ritualised emblem sustained through repetition. Her performance becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal ideology is renewed, stabilised, and passed forward under the guise of devotional virtue.

Ritualised obedience and self-effacement as normative gender acts

In the play, *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*, Sitā's obedience is fashioned into a kind of ritual practice through which the play sustains a long-established patriarchal ethic. What might seem like personal devotion, when read closely, becomes a staged pattern of behaviour designed to associate femininity with moral submission. Her willingness to comply is repeatedly framed as a virtue, so that womanhood appears to be realised only through the capacity to endure, to yield, and to efface one's own desires. This ideal is not spontaneous or instinctive but cultivated through the dramaturgical framework that governs the performance tradition.

A key element in this construction is the deliberate repetition of Sitā's subordinate stance. The *Ankīyā* repertoire preserves certain moments where Sitā's identity is entirely subsumed by her relationship to the male saviour. Upon witnessing the divine prowess of Rama, her internal state is articulated not as an expression of independent desire but as a humble acknowledgement of her great fortune in obtaining the supreme man as her husband. The significance of such a declaration lies not simply in its content but in its framing; it allows no room for dialogue or hesitation. Each repetition situates Sitā more firmly within an established gender code, making her obedience appear as an inherent aspect of her being. In this sense, the utterance functions performatively, producing the very norm it appears to express.

The play's structural imbalance further amplifies this effect. The intellectual and moral debates are reserved for the male figures, such as Rama, King Janaka, and the sage Vishwamitra, who articulate the path of dharma and the demands of honour. Sitā's voice, by contrast, is limited in scale and restricted to specific emotional registers. Her speech is largely confined to the sorrow of potential loss or the terror of the masculine other. When the fierce Paraśurāma threatens the assembly, Sitā does not assert agency; instead, she enacts a ritualised vulnerability, crying out to fate and questioning what has been written on her forehead or destiny.

Rather than challenging the source of the threat, her response is to lament her own pre-ordained suffering. Her quiet distress reflects a learned acquiescence. Even her physical presence is defined by a lack of independent posture, as seen in the stage directions that describe her leaning on the shoulders of her friends, suggesting that even her movement and stability are mediated by others. The dramaturgy reinforces a familiar pattern: instead of

asserting a self-contained identity, she conforms to the expectation that a virtuous woman demonstrates humility and dependency.

This recurring posture of self-effacement is integral to the ethical universe of the play. The more Sitā suppresses her own agency, the more the narrative elevates her as a moral exemplar. Her suffering is not incidental but presented as a form of devotion, drawing the audience into an emotional economy in which endurance becomes the hallmark of the feminine ideal. Even her silence acquires aesthetic force; her lowered gaze and the stylised description of her as a golden doll contribute to an imagery through which virtue is recognised and validated.

The persistence of these gestures across the performance creates a self-reinforcing loop. Obedience, when enacted again and again, comes to appear natural; and because it appears natural, the dramaturgy represents it as the ethical centre of femininity. Sitā's obedience is not simply a trait attributed to her; it is the outcome of a representational system that requires its heroine to embody a culturally sanctioned model of womanhood. Seen in this light, *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* does more than depict Sitā's submission. It turns obedience and self-effacement into a codified language of gender, expressed through stylised behaviour and the emotional weight of suffering. By establishing these acts as both ethically desirable and theatrically compelling, the play reinforces a patriarchal order that depends on the repeated idealisation of feminine submission.

Disciplinary power: social surveillance, moral discourse, and the production of subjectivity

Sitā's conduct is shaped not only through the iterative performance of femininity but also through a broader disciplinary structure that governs how she understands, regulates, and ultimately internalises her own behaviour. Michel Foucault's theorisation of dispersed, continuous disciplinary power offers a useful way to read the forces that mould Sitā's identity (170–71). The play does not simply ask her to enact obedience; instead, it situates her within a moral ecosystem where surveillance, communal judgment, and authoritative discourse produce obedience as the only intelligible form of subjecthood available to her.

The first point of entry into this disciplinary matrix appears during the high-stakes environment of the *swayamvara*, where Sitā is subjected to a collective, competitive masculine gaze. The presence of the various kings and the heavy expectation of the assembly resemble what Foucault describes as a panoptic centre, where the observation of her virtue and her reaction to the proceedings matters more than her personal desire. From her entrance, she is made answerable to this gaze. The narrator's meticulous description of her every movement and the public scrutiny of her devotion to Rama create a form of behavioural self-adjustment; she must continually embody the shimmering purity of a golden doll to satisfy the moralised observation of the court.

The interventions of the Sūtradhāra and the spiritual authorities in the play demonstrate how disciplinary power operates through diffusion. In the world of the *Ankīyā - nāṭa*, the narrator does not merely describe events; he embodies the moral conscience of the community. When he directs the audience to observe Sitā's agitation and her absolute reliance on Rama, he shifts her presence from a private individual to a site of cultural

meaning. Her response to the arrival of the threatening Paraśurāma reveals the psychological movement from external pressure to internal self-scrutiny. She does not question why she must be the one to suffer the terror of the sage's wrath; instead, she turns her inquiry toward her own destiny, lamenting what fate has written for her. This signals that surveillance has successfully shifted from social pressure to self-regulation, as she interprets external crisis as a reflection of her own spiritual standing.

Rama's authority deepens this disciplinary network. His presence functions as the absolute moral law or the regime of truth. When he confronts Paraśurāma or addresses King Janaka, his language is steeped in the discourse of divinity and duty. By framing his actions as the manifestation of supreme masculine prowess and divine will, Rama transforms the patriarchal structure of the marriage into something that appears necessary and righteous. Within this framework, Sitā's compliance ceases to be a personal choice and becomes a requirement of virtue itself. To act outside of this devotion would be indistinguishable from a violation of the cosmic order.

The culmination of this system lies in Sitā's internalisation of discipline. When she observes Rama's victory and expresses that it is her supreme fortune to have obtained such a husband, she demonstrates what Foucault identifies as the most effective form of power: the moment when external control becomes self-governance. Sitā no longer obeys because she is coerced; she obeys because she has come to believe that her identity is valid only in relation to her husband's glory. This internalisation transforms her into the idealised wife that the Vaishnavite patriarchal order seeks to preserve. By the play's end, her submission is not a loss of self but the very mechanism through which her subjectivity is recognised and validated by the divine gaze.

Affective attachments and the limits of disciplinary interpretation

The explanatory force of Butler's performativity and Foucault's disciplinary power accounts for much of how Sitā's subjectivity is shaped in *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa*, yet these frameworks alone cannot exhaust the emotional fabric of the Ram-Sitā relationship. The play is not an unambiguous archive of coercive structures; it is also a narrative suffused with tenderness, devotion, and grief. These affective currents do not simply coexist with disciplinary norms but actively complicate them, revealing the limits of a purely structural interpretation of Sitā's obedience. To attend to the emotional registers of the text, its expressions of longing, shared suffering, and intimate attachment, is to recognise that affect operates as a parallel mode of subject formation within the play's moral universe (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179–80).

This complexity becomes visible in the way Sitā articulates her relationship with Rama during the moment of extreme crisis when Paraśurāma threatens his life. Even in moments of profound vulnerability, she frames her identity through relational attachment rather than through self-preservation. When she laments the cruel tricks of fate and the potential sorrow of her husband, her distress reveals a form of selfhood rooted in emotional correspondence where devotion is not an external imposition but an internalised mode of being that orients her sense of duty. In such moments, Sitā's obedience cannot be neatly mapped onto a Foucauldian model, in which subjects comply primarily because they are

disciplined (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 172-73). Instead, obedience and feeling become entangled: devotion deepens her moral commitments, and these commitments, in turn, shape how she expresses devotion. Her femininity is performed within a social world structured by power, but it is also inflected by the emotional meaning she attaches to that world.

Rama's position extends this tension. While he acts from a position of institutionalised authority, demonstrated when he humbles Paraśurāma to protect the social and cosmic order, the text and performative tradition foreground the emotional stakes of his role. Foucault's account of power, which is deliberately impersonal and systemically driven, offers limited space for understanding how emotional conflict shapes the exercise of authority. Yet in *Rāma-vijay Ankīyā-nāṭa*, the narrative insists that the weight of divine duty matters. It reveals how the path of virtue can demand actions that require immense fortitude, producing a moral field in which power is not devoid of affect but structurally entangled with it. This is evident when Rama reassures the terrified Sitā, bridging the gap between his role as a warrior-god and his role as a protective husband.

This entanglement is crucial for reading Sitā's compliance. Her acceptance of abandonment undeniably aligns with disciplinary logic: she internalises the normative authority of dharma and responds through quiet submission (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202). Yet her submission is not shaped solely by fear of social judgment. It is also mediated by her emotional bond with Rama, which renders refusal not merely culturally transgressive but emotionally impossible. Duty, affection, and relational identification intersect in ways that exceed the explanatory reach of either performativity or disciplinary theory. What emerges is a form of "affective discipline" in which women inhabit patriarchal expectations through the emotional significance those expectations accrue within intimate relationships (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191).

Reducing Sitā's actions to a singular theoretical category would thus flatten their complexity. Her behaviour is at once an enactment of gender norms, an internalised response to a disciplinary regime, and an expression of her attachment to Rama. These forces do not operate harmoniously; they work through contradiction. The narrative draws its emotional intensity precisely from the conflict between dharma's moral rigidity and the human costs it demands. Sitā and Rama's suffering exposes the fractures within the patriarchal order: the same moral system that legitimises authority also generates profound emotional injury. These fractures do not dismantle the system, but they invite critical attention to the instability of its foundations.

Affective attachment, then, does not neutralise patriarchy; it gives it depth and durability. When obedience becomes a language of love, patriarchal control ceases to appear coercive and instead takes on the sheen of moral or emotional necessity. Sitā's devotion deepens her subordination by aligning her sense of virtue with compliance. But this alignment should not be mistaken for uncoerced agency. It represents a complex process of subjectification in which affective ties and normative structures merge to shape a subject who experiences obedience as essential to the very meaning of love (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 182).

Yet affect also opens unsettling spaces within the narrative. Rama's grief exposes the violence embedded in dharma, while Sitā's compassionate endurance introduces an ethical

resonance that strains against the structures confining her. These disruptions do not overturn patriarchal authority, but they unsettle its coherence. They reveal a world where power and emotion remain tangled, where obedience is performed not only under surveillance or normative pressure but also through relational feeling.

Performing power: Sitā as the convergence of performativity, discipline, and emotion

The representation of Sitā in the *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* reaches its fullest conceptual force through the interplay of performativity, discipline, and affect. This triangulated mechanism renders her identity both culturally legible and ideologically compelling. Sitā's subjectivity is forged through an assemblage of embodied repetition, internalised moral surveillance, and emotionally charged devotion, revealing a model of femininity that appears natural precisely because it is produced through multiple reinforcing modes of power. These modes converge to stabilise a patriarchal order that is at once ethical, affective, and aesthetically persuasive.

At the level of gesture and performance, the play persistently casts Sitā in poses of calibrated restraint. Her bowed posture, measured movements, and softly modulated speech cite a long-standing repertoire of feminine decorum. However, in this specific *Ankīyā-nāṭa*, the construction of her character is deepened by a metaphysical layer: her recollection of her divine origin. In the document, the narrator and the songs frequently remind the audience of her status as the Mother of the World, who has taken human form. This remembrance of her previous life does not empower her to challenge her earthly circumstances; rather, it serves to sanctify her human suffering. By viewing her current life through the lens of a divine past, her worldly submission is transformed into a cosmic duty. Her bodily comportment is thus bound to an ethical horizon where departing from dharma would render life void, making her submission not merely desirable but spiritually mandated.

The emotional texture of the play further solidifies this dynamic through Sitā's recurring recourse to destiny. When faced with the terrifying presence of Paraśurāma, she does not seek a logical or political solution; instead, she whispers to herself about the cruel tricks of fate and questions what destiny has written on her forehead. This reliance on "*Vidhi*" (Providence) reflects a general female tendency, often encouraged within patriarchal frameworks, to neutralise suffering by externalising the cause. By attributing her pain to an inescapable "decree of destiny" rather than to the specific patriarchal structures or the masculine aggression surrounding her, she renders her own suffering invisible as a site of protest. This affective self-restraint functions as a disciplinary mechanism, demonstrating how power becomes most effective when internalised as the subject's own moral reasoning.

This convergence is amplified by the hierarchical structure of the male-controlled moral universe. Rama's authority is more than a personal trait; it is a discursive operation that sacralizes patriarchal authority. By breaking the bow and later humbling the pride of Paraśurāma, Rama aligns his masculine sovereignty with the cosmic order. Sitā's gendered role is absorbed into this political cosmology, where the duties of kingship and divinity supersede personal happiness. Foucault's framework clarifies how such power transforms coercive decisions into moral imperatives, thereby disciplining subjects not through force but through the rhetoric of righteousness.

Yet affect cannot be dismissed as a mere supplement to these structures. Sitā's devotion toward Rama renders disciplinary norms emotionally intelligible. In her expressions, where she describes Rama as more precious to her than life itself, devotion folds seamlessly into duty. This reveals how women often inhabit patriarchal expectations through the emotional significance those expectations accrue within intimate relationships. The emotional and the ethical become indistinguishable, producing a model of feminine subjectivity in which love itself becomes the mechanism by which patriarchal norms are sustained. Sitā's fidelity, rather than countering discipline, reinforces it by transforming obedience into the affective expression of relational loyalty.

The culmination of these convergences occurs in Sitā's reaction to Rama's victory. Her joy in her fortune of obtaining such a husband is the distilled form of her subjectification. While framed as a moment of fulfillment, it reveals the depth of her internalisation: she experiences her value only in relation to the success and protection of the male hero. Thus, Sitā becomes the narrative site where feminine performativity, disciplinary power, and affective attachment meet. She does not merely enact obedience; she experiences it as the moral texture of love and the expected aesthetic of womanhood. The ideological force of *Rām-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* lies in its ability to construct a subject who upholds patriarchal dharma not because she is coerced, but because she has learned to interpret submission as the ethical and emotional fulfilment of her role.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Rām-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* demonstrates that Sitā's portrayal is not a neutral recovery of a canonical figure but the outcome of a cultural process in which gendered expectations are aesthetically reinforced, morally justified, and emotionally sustained. Her representation emerges through a constellation of performative gestures, ritualised silences, and affectively charged responses that the play positions as markers of virtuous femininity. Judith Butler's theorisation of gender performativity clarifies how these repeated behaviours acquire the sheen of naturalised traits. The stage becomes the site where femininity is rehearsed into recognisability, and Sitā's apparent authenticity is revealed as the effect of citational practices that align womanhood with modesty, endurance, and devotional containment.

Yet the persuasive force of these norms cannot be understood without Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power. Within the moral universe of the play, Sitā's conduct is shaped by an intricate arrangement of surveillance and normative pressure, through communal scrutiny, theological discourse, and the hierarchical authority embodied by Rama. These elements create a disciplinary environment that structures her possibilities for action and interpretation. Sitā's acceptance of her suffering is not the passive submission of a silenced figure but the outcome of a process through which she learns to read obedience as the ethical form of feminine virtue. Discipline thus functions not through coercion but through the internalisation of moralised expectations.

However, to reduce Sitā's subjectivity to performativity and discipline alone would obscure a crucial dimension of the text: the affective life that gives emotional depth to her compliance. Her devotion to Rama, her sorrow at separation, and her sense of shared moral

destiny invest patriarchal norms with emotional legitimacy. Affective ties enable her to interpret sacrifice as fidelity and endurance as love, complicating rigid distinctions between agency and constraint. In this sense, Sitā's choices reflect neither unresisted submission nor autonomous decision-making but a dynamic interplay between feeling, duty, and normative regulation.

Taken together, these insights reveal that *Rāma-vijaya Ankīyā-nāṭa* constructs Sitā as a subject forged at the intersection of repeated gendered performance, disciplinary self-regulation, and affective attachment. The play's ideological potency lies in its ability to weave moral virtue, emotional loyalty, and cultural expectation into a unified feminine ideal. Yet this very coherence creates opportunities for critique. By tracing the mechanisms through which Sitā's identity is produced, this study demonstrates how Assamese performance traditions participate in shaping gendered consciousness and how contemporary readings might reopen these texts to alternative, resistant, or emancipatory interpretations.

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Rukmiṇī's Defiance: The Dialectic of Reason and Emotion in Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya*

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Abstract

This study examines Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya* as a site where private emotion and public reason collide, producing a dialectical movement that transforms Rukmiṇī from an object of dynastic exchange into an active subject of devotion. Reading the *kāvya* through close textual analysis, the study traces how political calculation embodied by Rukmī and the spectacle of alliance-making functions as the dominant order, while Rukmiṇī's inward devotion to Kṛṣṇa constitutes the oppositional force that undermines it. Her refusal is indirect and tactical: by sending Vedanidhi with a secret message, she creates the conditions for Kṛṣṇa's *haraṇa*, which the poem frames as inviting, protective, and liberating rather than coercive. The narrative's emotional register, intensified by the Purbarāga mood, legitimizes personal desire as a form of moral knowledge and thereby corrects patriarchal reason. Theoretically, this study situates this movement in dialectical terms. An in-depth analysis of the interior monologue, ritual movement, and public spectacle reveals how Śaṅkaradeva stages a rupture in which inner truth becomes a political force. This study argues that Rukmiṇī's tactical, affective agency enables the fragility of patriarchal power and models a form of resistance that is rooted in emotional knowledge. In doing so, the *kāvya* emerges as a sustained critique of social forms that deny personal will.

Keywords: Dialectics, subjectivity, reason, patriarchal exchange, emotional agency.

Introduction

Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya* occupies a pivotal place in the literary and cultural history of medieval Assam as a devotional retelling of a Purāṇic episode that negotiates the intersections of gender, power, and spiritual subjectivity within the larger ambit of the neo-Vaishnavite movement. The *kāvya* was composed during a period when Śaṅkaradeva sought to translate scriptural knowledge into vernacular language and reshape Assamese religious consciousness. This work transforms the narrative of Rukmiṇī's abduction by Śrīkṛṣṇa under the framework of socio-political and emotional structures governing human existence. While the original *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* presents the episode in largely theological terms, Śaṅkaradeva's version foregrounds Rukmiṇī's inner life, allowing the poem to function simultaneously as an articulation of *bhakti* and a critique of patriarchal authority (Holdrege 2015). Although the dominant sentiment (*angirasa*) of Śaṅkaradeva's *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya* is *śṛṅgār* (romance/erotic), the aspect wherein the *bīr* (heroic), *roudra* (furious), *bhayānak* (terrible), *karuṇa* (pathos/sorrow), and *hāsyā* (comic) *rasas* are blended with *śṛṅgār* within the story's structure and narration, ultimately merging holistically into

bhakti rasa (devotion), which influences or partly shapes the concept of poetry in medieval Assamese literature.

The purpose of this discussion is not to judge the poem's structure or poetic beauty but rather the main objective of this paper is to conduct a comprehensive discussion on the dialectical understanding of Rukmiṇī's defiance. In addition to the aspects of this *khaṇḍakāvya*'s (short epic) characterization and language usage, it also designates the *kāvya* as one of Śaṅkaradeva's most popular compositions. From this perspective, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya* holds special significance in the stream of poetic literature. The main reason for this is the multidimensionality and dramatic quality of the poem in terms of its subject matter. Observing the plot structure of the poem, it is seen that the structural background is built through a cohesive style divided into beginning (*ādi*), middle (*madhya*), and end (*anta*) stages. Each of these sections in the plot structure has its own unique role and significance divided into twenty episodic segments: "Vandanā (invocation/prayer)", "Narration of Bhīṣmaka", "Description of Rukmiṇī's beauty", "Preparation of Rukmiṇī's *svayamvara*", "Sending Vedanidhi to Śrīkrṣṇa", "Rukmiṇī's Message", "Kṛṣṇa's Journey to Kuṇḍila", "Kṛṣṇa's Sight Seeing of Kuṇḍila", "Excitement /Commotion in Kuṇḍila upon Kṛṣṇa's Arrival", "Rukmiṇī's Jubilation", "The King's Battle with Śrī Kṛṣṇa", "Kṛṣṇa's Battle with Śīsupāla", "Battle between Jarāsandha and Śrī-Balabhadra", "The Rout of the Opposing Army", "Rukmī's return to Battle", "The Exchange of words between Śrīkrṣṇa and Rukmī", "Battle between Śrīkrṣṇa and Rukmī", "The Weeping of the people from Kuṇḍila", "Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī's wedding", "The Rituals/Ceremony of Śrīkrṣṇa and Rukmiṇī's marriage."

Objective/ Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretative textual analysis of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya*, drawing primarily on close reading to examine the representation. The primary objective of this study is to analyze Rukmiṇī's response to the political compromise over her marriage and how that response poses a challenge to the power that seeks to shape her destiny. It further seeks to analyze how her mental and emotional agony, as a result of being caught in two contradictory currents, becomes the basis of her resistance. She moves in a certain way while her family has made plans to move in a completely different direction. The gap between her feelings and her family's plans becomes a space for action, where she moves beyond her assigned role to reveal her independent will. For this reason, this study seeks to further demonstrate how her final decision to join Śrī Kṛṣṇa becomes an act of her subjectivity, a subjectivity whose expression is possible precisely through the inner persistence of truth and not through the open defiance of the war.

Defiance, dialectics, and development of feelings

Rukmiṇī is the princess of the Vidarbha Kingdom, daughter of King Bhīṣmaka and Queen Śaśiprabha. She learns about Śrīkrṣṇa through stories shared by itinerant travellers passing through Kuṇḍila. The poem notes, (*mādhavara rūpa guṇa caritra kahinī, deśa deśāntarī mukhe śunilā Rukmiṇī... jagatato nāhi rūpa Kṛṣṇaka samāna*), meaning, "Rukmiṇī heard from the mouths of travellers from many lands... that none in the world is equal to Kṛṣṇa" (verse 26). These loose stories form the seeds of her inner life. They provide her with

a vision of Kṛṣṇa, unmediated by any kind of intervention, something more akin to the kind of knowledge that accrues within oneself. Her feelings are evident through her interior monologues, where her love for Kṛṣṇa develops as a kind of inward settling, a kind of decision that she holds silently long before acting on it. The poem makes this explicit when she confesses, (*śiśukāla hante svāmī bāri ācho māne, mokā bihā karibanta prabhu nārāyaṇe*), meaning, “Since childhood, I have chosen Him as my husband in my mind” (verse 84). Rukmiṇī’s thoughts flow in the opposite direction, toward Kṛṣṇa and his impending arrival, led by devotion and emotional certainty. Śaṅkaradeva uses this in the form of interior monologues, the presentation of a character’s unspoken thoughts that directly allows the reader to access Rukmiṇī’s emotional core.

When Rukmiṇī’s brother arranges her marriage with Śiśupāla, Śaṅkaradeva depicts her as being internally shattered rather than externally resisting it. The poem describes the pain of her separation in powerful immediacy: “Her body burned constantly in the pain of separation from Kṛṣṇa” (*kṛṣṇara biyoge deha dahe sarvākṣaṇa* verse 83). This grief consumes her entire body. At this moment, her internal monologue is described in a sense that goes out against the institution that binds her, “Alas, O Fate! My hopes have been severed... my wicked brother has caused my sorrow” (*hā daiva bidhī āve bhaila āsā cheda, pāpiṣṭha bhayāi dile kīno hṛdi kheda* verse 85). Her rage becomes more pointed when she explicitly addresses Rukmī, “He is not a brother; this sinner is a chandal” (*bhāi nohi, iṭo pāpī cāṇḍāla* verse 85). In this act of speech, she recognizes the emotional violence produced by his power over her. From Jamison’s perspective, for many women in early India, grief is a form of “contained resistance,” where they are able to express the truth of their suffering when all other options have been denied to them (Jamison 204). Rukmiṇī’s grief has the same function, marking the moment when her inner pain begins to give rise to a private but steadfast resistance.

Unable to confront her family openly, Rukmiṇī first resorts to the one that is open to her, an indirect but no less radical means of agency. She sends Vedanidhi, the Brahmin, as an emissary to Kṛṣṇa and chooses to trust her secret message rather than any public intervention (verse 237). The words she entrusts him with form the most unambiguous expression of her agency in the poem. She commands Kṛṣṇa to come at once, to take her as the husband she has already chosen in her heart, and to delay only at the risk of her own life. The verse quotes her plea with rare precision: “Knowing this, come and take me away, O Lord of my life. Otherwise, death will be my lord” (*heṇa jāni jānte āsi niyā prāṇanātha, nohe teve bhailā mora maraṇeśe nātha* verse 137). Through these words, Rukmiṇī ceases to be the object of political negotiation and stakes out her own will with an unambiguous urgency. The insistence on secrecy, “Go secretly so that no one else knows” (*āne yena najānaya gopya kari*

yāiba guru kathā yene nuhikā pracāra verse 109) reflects the fact that her resistance must operate within the terms that constrain her.

There is an inherent dialectic between the male and female worlds in the society represented in the poem. The male sphere is mostly embodied by Rukmī's political caution operating through calculation and lineage. The female sphere, represented by Rukmiṇī and her mother, Śaśiprabha, is marked by private expressions (interior monologues). These two forms of life continually clash, encircling Rukmiṇī. One treats Rukmiṇī as a political asset, while the other recognizes her as a person with inner desires and dignity. Dialectical overcoming does not annihilate the opposed term; it preserves what is vital while lifting it into a higher form (Hegel 11), The synthesis, therefore, that emerges from this conflict is Rukmiṇī's defiance acts as a *Aufhebung* (to cancel and preserve at the same time) (Hegel 108). Each character in the poem is bound by the strings of human relationships. Within the heart of the poem, human relationships have kept the social status intact, and the subject matter is integrated among the political consciousness. Through the picturesque presentation of the roles played by love, friendship, emotion, feeling, and revolutionary consciousness in the human family and social life, the poem has been able to keep the metaphorical character of social life intact. As human beings are not aggregate atoms subjected to human laws solely governed by self-interest. They embody a range of feelings, are passionate about different emotions, and invoke different delights. The opposition between what Rukmiṇī feels and what she must accept as her fate becomes the basis of her resistance to her fate. Therefore, defiance is an indirect form of resistance. As Max Horkheimer argues, "instrumental reason" reduces life to calculation and utility, ignoring the emotional and moral dimensions that make human experience meaningful (Horkheimer 25). However, Rukmiṇī refuses to live according to this narrow form of reasoning. She chooses emotion, dignity, and inner fulfillment over the political logic imposed by her brother. Rukmiṇī's defiance lies in what is essentially required for human life, done mostly implicitly. She considers instrumental reasons to be secondary compared to her emotion that is the basic human need for her to maintain the emotional fulfillment. When she says, (*pāchese kahibā mora bacana sandeśa*), "Then, tell Him my message" (verse 99), she takes control of the situation without open defiance, which her society would not allow. It is a performative act that first occurs in her mind, then through her message, and finally in her choice to follow Kṛṣṇa when he comes to take her.

Power, politics and patriarchy

The one of many objectives of this poem is to transform the senses towards absolute (spiritual) bliss. It is equally significant that this happiness is within the reach of ordinary humans; therefore, the act of abduction by Kṛṣṇa has been portrayed as being accomplished through human *līlā* (divine play). Kṛṣṇa's own act overturns the power dynamics in which Rukmiṇī is caught. His decision to respond to her message disrupted a structured system that required adherence. By enacting this rescue, Śaṅkaradeva's *kāvya* seems to portray that individual feelings can undermine the contracts made by others in the name of reason and dharma (righteousness).

King Bhīṣmaka in Śaṅkaradeva's portrayal emerged as a model for an ideal monarch as he administered the kingdom as if the people living in Kuṇḍila were his own children

(*putravate kare rājā prajāka pālana* verse 13). This marks a sharp contrast to his son Kurmi (eldest son) and his other sons, who are referred to as unreasonable or capricious. In a “true and consistent” (*āgata pācata satya ekese bacana* verse 13) speech, King Bhīṣmaka positions himself as the morally upright center of the royal household. Nevertheless, this good king is also beholden to the paternal expectations of a marriage system in which a daughter must marry at the ‘right time’ within the social order and according to the royal family’s political convenience. Bhīṣmaka and his ministers, after all, decide that Kṛṣṇa is the best groom and there is “no other in the three worlds besides Madhava” (*mādhavata pare trijagate nāhi āna* verse 42), but the final authority is not with the king. In Rukmī’s psyche, Kṛṣṇa’s Yādava background, culturally associated with cowherds, lowers his social worth. Therefore, he rejects Kṛṣṇa because of his status, asserting that such a “wicked one” would make an unfit match and demands Śiśupāla as the groom instead- *tohmāka dibāka badha kare duracar, śiśupāla rājākese āni āche bara-* that is, “the wicked one obstructs giving her to You,” (verse 131). In the Mahābhārata, Duryodhana similarly describes Kṛṣṇa as a disruptive, low-status outsider (*Sabhā-parva*, Book 2). Moreover, Rukmī’s voice, above all others, comes across as domineering and forceful. His refusal reflects caste arrogance and a bourgeois obsession with prestige rather than Rukmī’s happiness. This is how male reasoning is discursively embodied through masculinized political calculation.

The poem maintains a patriarchal structure but shows clear differences between the various types of male leaders. Bhīṣmaka, even while being the head of the household, is not a patriarch with authoritarian force; he does not protest against his ministers’ and kinsmen’s advice of Kṛṣṇa as the ideal groom for his daughter. He remained open and accepted their decisions without questioning them. This allows him to not fall into the dialectics discussed earlier. From this, it can be inferred that the male characters’ voices in the poem are not always authoritarian. Instead, Rukmī’s obstinate refusal to accept Kṛṣṇa as Rukmī’s husband is at the center of the problem, for Rukmī’s politics are driven by his own interests and pride, and he seeks to make a political alliance for his own political clique.

However, it is important to note that various forms of *rasa* play a vital role in this poem. The social spectacle that comes with Rukmī’s marriage is revealed as the kings convene, and with them, the city becomes an exhibition of political prowess: “With such magnificence, King Śiśupāla arrived at the city of Kuṇḍila” (*hena camatkāre śiśupāla nṛpavara anantare pāiā goi kuṇḍila nagara* verse 76). The application of *śṛīṅgāra rasa* (erotic sentiment) in the description of the mental state of the ‘lust-struck’ kings who were captivated by Rukmī’s immense beauty, alongside the expression of *bīr rasa* (heroic sentiment) revealed through Rukmī’s abduction. On the other hand, the wretched condition of the kings after the abduction is also indicative of *hāsya rasa* (comic sentiment).

To mitigate the conflicts, Kṛṣṇa chooses his way through “contradiction” as it is the “the root of all movement and vitality” (Hegel 439). Through the horror of war (as mentioned in the episodes such as “Kṛṣṇa’s war with different kings”, “War between Balbhadrā and Jarāsandha”, and “War between Kṛṣṇa and Rukmī”), has expanded the prevalence of human emotions and feelings within the story. Kṛṣṇa’s defeat of various kings in war through his own strength and cleverness has given a unique dimension to the humanization of the

characters. Although most of the characters in the poem represent the upper class (royalty), under the influence of character arrangement and the socialization of the story, these characters have gained a universal dimension. The *kāvya* acts as a broad medium for destroying symbols of *apasāmskriti* (decadent culture/evil forces) from society, such as Śiśupāla, Jarāsandha, Chandraketu, and Rukmī. Through the destruction of these evil forces, the balance of society is maintained, and society becomes habitable for its people.

It is significant that the full development of dramatic tension, suspense, or the rising action/climax, which the middle part of any story is supposed to express, is completed in this poem. The act of the deprived kings uniting and preparing to attack Kṛṣṇa makes the fear of a ‘broken union’ evident in the poem. However, in any meaningful story, before the permanent union of the Hero and Heroine, the obstacles cross the extreme limit, and the hero, by displaying heroism, defeats the enemy side and paves the way for permanent union with the heroine. The wars fought by various kings against Kṛṣṇa and the defeat of those kings in the war give an objective form to the permanent union. The spiritual nature (*paramārthika tatva*) and divinity of Kṛṣṇa’s character are well proven by the participation of the Three Worlds (*triloka*) during the wedding ceremony.

Purbarāga, harana and structure

Śaṅkaradeva, with his poetic excellence, constructed the poem’s background through *purbarāga*. Through this, he created dramatic tensions in the story, and to establish the spiritual/transcendental significance of the story, he created obstacles to the successful fruition of this *purbarāga*. Meaning, the very first section covers a total of four chapters: the narration of Bhīṣmaka’s lineage, the description of Rukmiṇī’s beauty, the preparations for Rukmiṇī’s marriage, and the sending of Vedanidhi to Śrīkṛṣṇa. The specialty of this ‘Beginning’ section is that, alongside presenting an objective depiction of the story’s subject matter and background, the feeling of *purbarāga* (dawn of love) is transmitted in Kṛṣṇa’s mind parallel to Rukmiṇī.

The specialty of the ‘Beginning’ section is that, alongside presenting an objective depiction of the story’s subject matter and background, the transmission of *purbarāg* towards Rukmiṇī is happening in parallel within Kṛṣṇa’s mind. According to the characteristic features of ‘*Harāṇa-kāvya*’, *purbarāga* is not a supernatural action or reaction; rather, it is an idealistic suggestion. Both Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa are bound in love only after being attracted to each other’s idealistic forms. This means that the *purbarāga* of Rukmiṇī and Kṛṣṇa is idealistic. *Purbarāga* is defined as the state in which the Hero and Heroine become bound in the bonds of romance after being attracted to one another for idealistic reasons. The *purbarāga* of Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī is expressed simultaneously through the section ‘Description of Rukmiṇī’s Beauty.’ Through this *purbarāga*, he has created dramatic tension in the story, and to establish the spiritual/transcendental significance of the story, Śaṅkaradeva has created obstacles towards the successful fruition of this *purbarāga*.

Interestingly, the section in which Rukmiṇī is abducted has not been given a specific title. Although Śaṅkaradeva changed the meter in that section, moving from the *pada* meter to the *dulaḍi* meter, this section is still included under ‘Rukmiṇīr Ulah-mālaha’ (Rukmiṇī’s jubilation). Kṛṣṇa removes Rukmiṇī from the marriage, which is to be forcibly arranged. In

the context of this piece, ‘*haraṇa*’ (abduction) can also mean protective retrieval of the soul. Kṛṣṇa’s abduction of Rukmiṇī is never depicted as an unwanted act. *Harāṇa* occurs only after Rukmiṇī invites Kṛṣṇa to her through her secret message to him through Vedanidhi. She says, “Knowing this, come and take me away, O Lord of my life” (*hena jāni jānte āsi niyā prāṇanātha* verse 137), making it clear that the action itself is initiated by Rukmiṇī’s own decision to act. The *harāṇa* is protective in the sense that the marriage being forced upon her is one she does not want. However, most importantly, it is an act of liberation, since Kṛṣṇa’s action on her behalf gives her the freedom to choose her own companion, the one who has lived in her heart all along. For these reasons, the *harāṇa* in this context is not a violent or forced seizure but rather a decisive intervention through which Kṛṣṇa retrieves and liberates Rukmiṇī from a political alliance from which she has no choice but to escape. It is the externalization of her internal refusal that is her emotional reality giving shape to events, and Kṛṣṇa’s arrival confirming the decision that she had already taken in her heart. Kṛṣṇa abducts Rukmiṇī to prevent evil (*duskṛti*). In the poem, Rukmī is a symbol of evil. For Rukmiṇī’s father and mother, Kṛṣṇa as a groom is a matter of supreme fortune. However, Rukmī created obstacles, and Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī are bound by a bond of love based on ideals. Therefore, in the background of the poem’s story, Rukmiṇī’s ‘*Harāṇa*’ (abduction) is actually a protest against the injustice and oppression committed against Rukmiṇī. Because of the justice demonstrated against that injustice, Rukmiṇī’s ‘*haraṇa*’ has, in a symbolic sense, transformed into Rukmiṇī’s ‘*uddhāra*’ (rescue/deliverance).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Rukmiṇī-harāṇa-kāvya* stands as one of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’s most subtle engagements with the interconnected domains of love, power, gender, and spiritual agency in Assam. By portraying Rukmiṇī’s inner world, Śaṅkaradeva transforms the Purāṇic narrative into a dialectic between emotional truth and the patriarchal political order. Rukmiṇī’s unwavering indirect resistance emerges through the inner strength that shapes her decisions, from her early, idealistic love for Kṛṣṇa to her resolute choice to send him a secret message commanding him to rescue her. Her defiance manifests as an embodied form of subjectivity, a refusal to be reduced to an instrument of her brother’s political aspirations. It is through her emotional clarity, grief, and moral insistence that she constructs her own agency within a system that seeks to silence her. Simultaneously, Kṛṣṇa’s intervention becomes an extension and affirmation of Rukmiṇī’s inward decision, shifting the act of *harāṇa* from a narrative of abduction to one of liberation. Śaṅkaradeva thus subverts the logic of patriarchal control by allowing Rukmiṇī’s emotional truth, rather than royal decree or masculine calculation, to determine the course of events. The dynamic interplay of *rasa*, political tension, and spiritual idealism intensifies this transformation, turning the poem into a devotional text and a subtle critique of social structures. Thus, Rukmiṇī’s journey narrates how emotional fulfillment, ethical conviction, and spiritual self-recognition can challenge oppressive structures without overtly confronting. Her defiance, grounded in dignity and internal resolve, is a model of subtle yet powerful resistance. By recasting *harāṇa* as *uddhāra* (rescue/deliverance), Śaṅkaradeva elevates Rukmiṇī’s agency and articulates a vision of love

and devotion that transcends political authority and reaffirms the autonomy of the human spirit.

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The Relevance of Śāṅkarī Teaching System to Modern Education

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Abstract

The modern education in India is considered to have developed during British rule in India with the influence of Western philosophy, culture, literature, science and technology. But after a long controversy between English and orientalist, regarding the contrast between Western and indigenous education, a comprehensive form was established up to the time of independence. The Constitution of India, with its democratic values like secularism, non-violence, tolerance, honesty, truth, love, cooperation, cohesiveness, sympathy, empathy, mutual respect, peace, etc., greatly influences the aims of education. Indian philosophies based on *Veda-upaniṣad*, *Bhāgavad-gītā*, *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*; the Indian Knowledge system of science, mathematics, yoga, etc., have contributed to the foundation of Indian education with the aims to develop scientific temper, logical thinking, environmental consciousness among people, and to eradicate superstition, prejudices, and conservativeness from society. With the inclusion of social sciences, humanities, polity, management, technology, and overall, as a liberal education, modern education strives to develop a human personality of knowledge and skills, and with a broad outlook of humanism and egalitarianism.

The system of Śāṅkarī teaching developed by Śāṅkaradeva is considered a renaissance that emerged in medieval Assam, characterized by the uprising of literature, art, culture, sculpture, music, drama and human values. Based on neo-*Vaiṣṇava* ideals, it taught the people the scientific and logical way of thinking, to opt for their freedom of learning and worshiping, to liberate themselves from superstitious and unscientific traditions. It taught them the democratic outlook, social equality, cohesion, cooperation, compassion, and humanity to live a life of art, culture and literature.

Here, an attempt is made to identify the elements of Śāṅkarī teaching which may resemble the aims, objectives, content, and process of modern education and, thereby, to find out the relevance of the former to the latter.

Keywords: Śāṅkari teaching, modern education, relevance, content, process.

Introduction

1.1 The modern education

The concept of modern education in India had been initiated by the British East India Company in the later decades of the seventeenth century (Charter Act, 1668). By Clause 43 of the Charter Act, 1813, the East India Company was bound to expend for the revival and

improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, as well as for the introduction and promotion of knowledge of sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India (Bhatt and Aggarwal 1). This Clause 43 is considered as the foundation-stone of English, i.e., western education in India. Dr. S.N. Mukherjee (1951) writes- “This clause is rightly regarded as the foundation-stone of the English educational system in India, because it was for the first time that the British Parliament admitted that education in India had a claim on public revenues”(Mukherji, S.N 35). This initiative of the British gradually turned into an alternative to the indigenous education system developed in India since the Vedic period.

In the process of development of a modern education system, British Govt. in India has appointed Indian Education Commission under Sir William Hunter in 1882, Indian University Commission, 1902, Gokhale’s Resolution on Primar Education (1910), The Calcutta University Commission (1917), The Hartog Committee Report (1929), Government of India Act (1935), Wardha Education Committee (1937) and so on. After independence, the Govt. of India has also appointed Commissions like University Education Commission (1948-49), Secondary Education Commission (1952-53), Committee on Basic Education (1956), Committee on Religious and Moral Education (1960), Emotional Integration Committee (1961), Indian Education Commission (Kothari Commission, 1964-66), National Committee on the status of Women in India (1974) etc. Govt. of India has also adopted the National Policy on Education (1986), the National Curriculum Framework (2000 and 2005), and the latest National Education Policy (2020) for the improvement of education in the country.

Different philosophies of India and the West have been influencing the aims and objectives of education since the British rule. Different sociological, cultural and economic factors play an important role in framing the curriculum of education. Thus, the seed of western education budded in the seventeenth century, passed through a historical route of omission and commission, and with all philosophical and sociological contributions which took more than two centuries to form the modern education in India.

1.2 The Śāṅkarī teaching system

Born in 1449, Śāṅkaradeva started his education at the age of twelve in a *gurukula* school (*Ṭol*) of the great Brahmin scholar Mahendra Kandali at Bardowa of Nogaon district in Assam. The society of the medieval period, in which Śāṅkaradeva flourished, was a diversified society inhabited by different casts and communities. Śāṅkaradeva, in his verse adaptation of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, has taken the scope of highlighting local names of communities in place of national communities mentioned in the original Sanskrit *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. He composes:

kirāṭa kachāri khācī gāro miri
yavana kaṅka gowāla
asama maluka dhobā ye turuka
kubāca mleccha caṅḍāla.

(*Bhāgavata* 2. 53)

Coming in 1228, the Ahom expanded their kingdom up to the river Kalang till 1536. Śaṅkaradeva witnessed at least six Ahom Kings from Chuchenpha (1439-1488) to Chukhampha (1552-1603). He spent the latter part of his life in the Koch kingdom from 1546 to his death in 1568 (Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times* 112-113).

Śaṅkaradeva's teachings can be traced from his earlier composition of *Harischandra Upākhyāna*, the first poetic narrative by the saint preacher, by which he very clearly established the pure type of monotheism, where no god or goddesses, except the supreme reality Lord Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa. This poetic work of the preacher can be regarded as the first scripture of the Śaṅkarī teaching system. Although all of his literary works are doctrinal, the core among them are the poetic works *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, *Bhakti-pradīpa*, *Ajāmilopākhyāna*, the six of his plays, and his musical compositions like *Bargīt* and *Bhaṭimā*. The enactment of his first special type of play named *Cihna-yātrā* at a very young age can be regarded as the first major visual class of his doctrinal teaching, which earned him not only fame and popularity, but also attracted a lot of scholarly and elderly people to his ideology, who wanted to take initiation in the same, as evident from hagiographies.

Returning from a twelve-year-long pilgrimage, Śaṅkaradeva started his formal system of instruction by establishing a *Nāmghar* at Bardowā. He started writing different sections of *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, rendering of *Bhāgavata*, composition of prayer songs (*Bargītas*), and writing of a special type of plays called *Aṅkīyā-nāṭ*. This practice of writing continued up till the end of composing drama *Rāma-vijaya* when he had finally left his writing pen-*guruḥ jane tāte kāpkāṭhi erice* (*Guru-Carit-Kathā* 125, *ched* 384) Through all these writings, he attracted people to learn the stories of the scriptures and their essences. Through the *kīrtanas*, Śaṅkaradeva taught people to both sing and hear the stories of Kṛṣṇa in terms of lyrics enriched with meters, similes, etc. Most of the people could memorize those for their whole life, and some portion of them could read the scriptures. Thus, they became literate and educated by grasping the meaning and applying the morals in life. Regarding dramas, from the time of *Cihna-yātrā* up to *Rāma-vijaya*, people took part in it, either in acting, singing, playing instruments, or in costumes (*āhāryas*). They all became artisans, and the common people, as the spectators, became aware of the righteousness of life through enjoyment. Besides his disciples, the most common people were attracted by the singing of prayer songs (*Bargītas*). These were spread from one to another by memorizing, expanded to remote places, and thus, the ideology of Śaṅkaradeva was spread everywhere. In this way, the common people became literate with the knowledge of the *Bhāgavata*, *Gītā*, and the *Veda-vedānta* through chanting, singing, reciting, hearing the *kīrtanas*, *Bargīts*, and the *Bhāgavata*. On the other hand, the formal *chātraśāl* or *ṭola* education was not accessible to the common people, as only higher caste students had access to these brāhmanical institutions. Śaṅkaradeva, himself being a *kāyastha*, got admission in Mahendra Kandali's *ṭola*, because of their higher status in the *Bārabhuyā* family hierarchy. Though brought up in a *śākta* tradition, Śaṅkaradeva developed a monotheistic mentality from the very beginning of his school education. His first ever composition of a poem '*karatala kamala*' shows this tendency, which became outspoken when the teacher Mahendra Kandali asked him to prepare for learning about worshipping the goddess Durgā. Śaṅkaradeva directly refused to learn

Durgā Ric (stotra-hymn) and requested him to teach *Kṛṣṇa Ric* only (*Guru-Carit-Kathā* 17, *ched* 54). Gradually, Śaṅkaradeva developed a negative attitude towards Vedic rites and rituals promoted by the *chātraśāl* or *ṭola* institutions, and later on, he developed his own education system

2. The comparison between modern education and the Śaṅkarī system of teaching

To see the relevance of the Śaṅkarī teaching system in the context of the modern education system, if any, the former is to be examined in the context of the latter, which is being done in the following clauses.

2.1 The Constitution of India and the aim of education

As discussed in Clause 1, the trend of modern education in India has been greatly influenced by the Constitution of India, accepted after independence on 26th January, 1950. The Constitution of India, in its preamble, states the objectives of national policy in the following words:

“We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India in to a Sovereign, Secular, Democratic, Republic and to secure to all its citizens: social, economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity; and to promote among them all; fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation.”

(Nurrulla and Naik 370)

To achieve these constitutional goals, the nation has decided to adopt three major programs:

(1) Democracy as a way of life; (2) socialistic pattern of society; and (3) industrialization based upon modern science and technology (Nurrulla and Naik 372). Education is considered the chief instrument to transform these goals into reality. The role of education is directly related to the provisions of the Constitution, as stated below.

The Constitution, by its Article 14, provides equality before law, Article 15 states the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, Article 17 abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form, Article 24 provides the prohibition of employment of children in factories, etc. Article 25 provides freedom to manage religious affairs. The Constitution, by its Article 29, guarantees that “any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof, having a distinct language, script or culture of its own, shall have the right to conserve the same” and it further declares that “no citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving aid out of the State funds, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them”. Article 45 of the Constitution made provision for free and compulsory (universal) primary education realizing the proper development of democracy. By the Article 46, the Constitution provides that “the State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the community, and, in particular, of the schedule castes and the scheduled tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation”. (Bhatt and Aggarwal 130-132). Thus, the Constitution of India

provides the democratic base in the country, and the educational system had to be designed to play a major role in implementing these values through various means and activities.

Śaṅkarī teaching system

Like the Constitution of our country, which wants to ensure social justice to the people of India, Śaṅkaradeva's foremost missionary zeal was to restore human dignity and social equality among the people. The four-caste system of *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra* was more prominent in medieval India. In those days, the lower caste people were not allowed to access the Hindu (*Vedic*) scriptures. It was mainly due to lack of the process of assimilation between Aryan and non-Aryan at that time. Since most of the people were devoid of knowledge due to a lack of scriptural or any other education, they were exploited by the priest class in the name of rituals. Śaṅkaradeva observed this situation from inert and boldly declared:

*kr̥ṣṇara kathāta yīto rasika
brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāgoi kika;
smaroka mātra hari dine rāti
nabācoi bhakati jāti-ajāti. (Kīrttana-ghoṣā verse 129)*

That means, one who is interested in the omnipotent and omniscient Lord-Kṛṣṇa does not need to be born to the Brahmin caste; one just needs to pray to the Lord (Hari) uninterruptedly (to get the divine favour). In the process of *bhakti*, there is no bar of caste and creed. With many other verses, viz., *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*, 118,120, 441, *Bhāgavata*, 2.12,4 etc., Śaṅkaradeva asserts that all individuals have the right to pray to God, irrespective of their races, castes and communities.

Regarding liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship, Śaṅkaradeva has certain observations. His education system is open to all castes and creeds, irrespective of gender and age. His religious opinion is reflected in his book *Kīrttana-ghoṣā* that, 'there is no caste consideration in worshipping God; rather, to worship Kṛṣṇa is a right to all.' Going against the Vedic caste-based tradition, Śaṅkaradeva, by composing literature in Assamese and Brajāvalī language, opened the treasure of knowledge from the *Veda*, *Vedānta*, *Upaniṣads*, *Gītā*, *Bhāgavata*, and *Purāṇas* to all common people. He established the right of reading and learning by introducing the *nāmghar* institution.

2.2 Democratic aim of education

The Constitution of India ensures democracy for all citizens of India. Apart from the operating system of a democratic government, democracy is a social system or order of social relationships where every individual finds her/his scope of development and self-expression according to their own potentiality. It provides equal cultural, social, economic, and political opportunities to all citizens in the context of liberty, fraternity, equal justice, and equal consideration. The success of democracy lies in the development of democratic values like non-violence, tolerance, honesty, truth, love, cooperation, cohesiveness, sympathy, empathy, mutual respect, peace, and appreciation, etc. Democracy is perfectly reflected in economic, social, educational, and cultural freedom and thus, in the development of a free and resourceful human personality. The success of a democratic society is also dependent on the

collective interest of common people, cooperation of groups and communities, spirit of understanding, strong belief in humanity, democratic attitude, and the collective welfare of society. Democracy is a matter of the realization in practice of rights and duties (Paleeri 89-91).

To fulfill the democratic spirit, education should be provided to all people irrespective of their caste, class, religion, culture, economic status, and social status. Educational aims, methods, curriculum, and overall content and process of education should be planned so that they carry the democratic values and spirit. Democratic education has to promote the spirit of freedom, brotherhood, dignity, social character, social justice, cohesiveness, equality of opportunities and good citizenship. In order to maintain democracy, education is an instrument and the foundation to support, enables, enlarge, and strengthen the democratic way of life.

Śaṅkarī teaching system

Though democracy is a new concept in twentieth century's India, the democratic spirit is not rare in the teaching of Śaṅkaradeva, propounded in the fifteenth century. Firstly, he made education available to all by (i) writing books in the vernacular language, (ii) inviting people of all castes to join learning, and (iii) opening the *nāmghar* institution easily accessible to all. Democratic values are most common in his scriptures. Although Śaṅkaradeva evolved a creed, his humble submission to the members of the cult was to foster a democratic outlook among them. He very clearly pronounced in his book, *Bhakti-pradīpa*, (verse 141) that:

*parara dharmmaka niḥimsibā kadācīta
karibā bhūtaka dāyā sakaruṇa citta;
huibā śānta citta sarva dharmata batsala
ehi bhāgavata dharmā jānā mahābala.*

It clearly states that, never to be hostile to others' religion, to be kind to all beings with heartfelt love; to be kind to all religions with a calm temperament, and this is the *Bhāgavata* faith and its power. One of the features of a democratic outlook is to be tolerant of all others' faith, opinion, culture, and tradition; to respect others' beliefs and practices. Śaṅkaradeva rightly followed this principle in his life and promoted it through his writings. In other verses (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1820-1821; *Bhāgavata* 11.257), he says, "Wise men are those who do not insist on the castes of people, whether they belong to Brahmin or *Cāṇḍāla*; who have equal point of view whether he/she is a donor or a picker; who have equal attitude towards a downtrodden or a gentleman." These kinds of messages of generosity and magnanimity are available everywhere in the writings of Śaṅkaradeva.

Democratic outlook in Śaṅkarī system

Śaṅkaradeva is found to be very compassionate and tolerant while he solved the conflicts of different sections of society with a sympathetic and liberal outlook and thus, established harmony. Śaṅkaradeva never forced anyone to accept his faith. As a result, a large section of people from different walks of life and faiths willingly embraced his faith. In fact, it is the catholicity of his secular ethics that magnetically attracted even the Mohammedans

and the so-called untouchables to accept his faith (Sharma, *Rethinking Sankaradeva's Philosophy* 12).

For imparting knowledge for the common good, he took resort of different modes of aesthetics like drama, painting, music, both vocal and instrumental, other modes of literature, including formal discussions and lectures on ethico-social concepts and religion. He established the multifunctional social institution *Nāmghar* with various purposes. Besides the main purpose, i.e., to pray to God socially, other purposes behind it are- the preaching of his religious and socio-ethical ideals, practicing dramatic and other arts, imparting knowledge through different media, solving knotty social problems with the motive of establishing the three great values viz., freedom, equality and fraternity (Sharma, *Rethinking Sankaradeva's Philosophy* 13).

2.3 The socialistic aim of education

The aims and objectives of modern education have been mostly influenced by the sociological point of view. The Sociology of Education mainly focuses on socializing human beings by transmitting to them the culture of the earlier generation. It observes that education acts as an instrument of social change, and education is a purposive, formal, and conscious effort for socialization. The main exponent of the socialistic view of education, John Dewey, felt that, if the children are to be fully developed, they should be developed in a socialistic point of view. Education should ignite social consciousness among the child. He said, "Curriculum and methods are the products of social situation."

The main focus of Śaṅkaradeva's teaching is also found to be the socialization of common people of medieval Assam. The objective of his teaching was to educate people, to make them feel their rights, to break the barrier of caste distinction, to liberate them from exploitation, and to make the people egalitarian with culture and literature. His teaching included love and kindness to all beings, non-violence to men and animals, love for nature, responsibility to the environment, scientific attitude towards life, logical thinking in worshipping, democratic outlook, and generosity and empowerment of women. His teaching encompasses the objective of uniting people under the same shade with exquisite art, culture, and literature, and to evolve an egalitarian society. He invited people to take initiation to one Almighty instead of being distorted to various gods and goddesses, and taught them that the door of the Almighty is open to all; everybody has the right to worship God. Under this focused light, he tried to enlighten the minds of people.

The pre-Śaṅkarī era was full of the middle-aged Indian *karma-kāṇḍa* system, characterized by animal sacrifice, *yāga-yajña*, idol worship, *dāna-dakṣiṇā*, and many other unscientific external rites, using which the priests exploited people religiously and economically. This social situation provoked Śaṅkaradeva to evolve a new education to make people free from these obligations. In *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva writes that all austerities like meditation, sacrificial rites, and gifts are futile, because the Lord Nārāyaṇa is satisfied only with the devotional prayer. Similarly, in *Bhāgavata*, he says that pilgrimage, sacred bathing, extreme gifts, sacrificial rites, meditation (*japa*), and austerity are not equal to a single part out of a crore, which is the name of Kṛṣṇa (*Kīrttana-ghoṣā* verse 211). By these verses, Śaṅkaradeva called for the people to observe a very simple ritual, the chanting of the

Name of Kṛṣṇa, by convincing them that the complex rituals are useless. It is also explained how this teaching would free people from economic exploitation,

nāhi sikā taṅkā byaya kāya kleśa
bhakatīta eko nāi;
yena tena mate Kṛṣṇaka smarile
eteke mukuti pāy//

(*Bhāgavata* 10.1132)

(To be devoted to the Lord, one need not expend money or to take pains in the body; one can attain emancipation by just recalling Kṛṣṇa in any way).

In this way, he makes the people free from priestly exploitation in the name of religion.

2.4 Common aims of education

In formulating the aim of modern education, different philosophical views, sociological views, scientific views, and the immediate needs of society are considered. Thus, the modern education system generally tries to cover the following common aims of education.

2.4.1 Individual aim of education

Education is to ensure the highest development of potentialities in the individual. Pastalozzi (1746-1827), the Swiss educator, opined that education is the natural, harmonious and progressive development of man's innate powers. M. K. Gandhi said, 'By education I mean all round drawing out of the best in child and man body, mind and spirit'. Swami Vivekananda's view was that 'education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man'. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan opined that, 'Education according to Indian tradition is initiation into the life of spirit, a training of human soul in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue'.

In this regard, Śaṅkaradeva aimed at developing the personality and virtues of the individual. Śaṅkaradeva, in his *Kirtana-ghoṣā* (verse 118-20), declares that if a (so-called) lower-class Cāṇḍāla utters the Lord's name, he instantly becomes a priest-like person. He need not be a Brahmin or a sage by caste, nor should he know much scripture for practicing religion, because the Almighty is gratified with a simple and sincere devotion to Him. Śaṅkaradeva believed in inherent virtue, not in the external caste of a man.

2.4.2 Education with the aim of harmonious development

Education is equally important for the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual development of personality. The great thinker Rousseau said, 'Harmonious development means the intellectual, religious, moral, and aesthetic development of the child.'

Though Śaṅkaradeva's teaching is basically spiritual, moral and aesthetic developments are key points of it. The curriculum of Śaṅkarī teaching encompasses a wide variety of elements for moral and aesthetic development. Śaṅkaradeva's literature and his life itself are full of moral and value education. For aesthetic development, he introduced music and drama. *Nāmghar* is the main institution of education, which is a community centre of cultural and religious practice. Regarding dramas, from the time of *Cihna-yātrā* up to *Rāma-vijaya*, people took part in it, either in acting, singing, playing instruments, or in costumes

(*āhāryas*). They all became artisans, and the common people, as the spectators, became aware of the righteousness of life through cultural enjoyment. Besides the disciples, most common people were attracted by the singing of prayer songs (*Bargits*). These were transmitted from one to another by imitation, expanded to remote places, and thus, the ideology of Śaṅkaradeva was spread everywhere. In this way, the common people became literate with the knowledge of *Bhāgavata*, *Gītā*, and *Veda-vedānta* through chanting, singing, reciting, and hearing the *kīrtanas* and the verses of *Bhāgavata*.

2.4.3 Citizenship building aim of education

Education has to build individuals as educated citizens, so that they can contribute towards the economic, social and political development of the country. Since the age of Śaṅkaradeva was an age of monarchy, the issue of democratic citizenship did not arise; the *Bhakti* movement of Śaṅkaradeva emerged as an instrument of social transformation. His *Nāmghars*, his literary works, cultural creations, and performances make even the common people educated, and thus, they were able to contribute towards social as well as economic development.

2.4.4 Vocational aim of education

Education should prepare individuals for physical fitness and economic well-being in future life. To increase productivity and to contribute to the economic enrichment of the country, vocational education is very much needed.

Śaṅkaradeva himself was physically and mentally sound by the practice of yoga in early life and by all healthy living styles. The *thāna* or *nāmghar* institution initiated by Śaṅkaradeva was economically self-sufficient through agriculture and allied vocational faculties. Later on, the *satra* institutions, developed after Mādhavadeva, became vocationally active with certain vocations, viz., *khanikarī-vidyā*, *kakati-vidyā*, *Majumdar*, Mask making, etc., and played a major role in vocational education, especially in *than-satras*.

2.4.5 Cultural aim of education

Education has to make humans realize that they are distinguished by spiritual and cultural enrichment, unlike other creatures. Through intellectual exercise and creativity, man has to enrich their mind and soul. Education has to teach men to inculcate, protect, and transmit the culture to the next generation.

Śaṅkaradeva adopted culture as part of his ideological tools or materials of his worship of God (*Bargīts* and *Ghoṣās* for prayer, dramatic performances for arousing devotional sentiment, etc.) and as a medium for preaching his neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith from the very beginning. But in due course, it took an independent stream of the Śaṅkarī teaching system. “The sculptors of Assamese *Nāmghars* evince a creative urge and devoted aspects. The art has flourished over the centuries and continues to be quite vibrant. Religion has been the vehicle of creative urge, and this aspect of its interaction with life should not be lost sight of” (Rastogi 69). “The way of the *satra* and *nāmghar* is conceived indicates that Śaṅkaradeva wanted all men, irrespective of castes, colour or ethnicity, to be on equal footing, having the right to sit and pray together to the Almighty in the simplest possible way” (Mahanta 69).

Thus, *nāmghar* has been acting as a place of social education, art and culture from the sixteenth Century up till now.

The *satra* institutions act both as a centre of religious learning and residential schools. The *Sattrādhikāra*, along with his subordinates have to take the responsibility of the education of the disciples (*bhakatās*) and pupil monks who are coming from different places to learn at the *satra*. “During the probationary period, the pupil monk serves as *āldharā* or personal attendant to the senior *bhakat*, who, as a guide, trains him in monastic life, discipline, liturgy, and doctrinal practices. The pupil monks also receive education from other functionaries of the *satra*, particularly from *Bhāgavatī* and *Pāṭhak*. Monks are further commissioned to translate Sanskrit texts into Assamese and compose original works either in Sanskrit or Assamese. It is a customary practice with the monks to copy and illustrate manuscripts, and to compile hagiographies (*Carit-puthis*), biographies of *Vaiṣṇava* saints and leaders of *Satras* to illustrate the Vaiṣṇavite ideal of individual life” (Barua 105)

Satras also work for excellence in art and crafts apart from religious education and monastic practices. They make different useful articles of cane, bamboo, wood, and articles required for dramatic performances like masks, *martār*, *agnigar*, etc. The *satras* are the treasures of old manuscripts. Besides preserving manuscripts, the *bhakatās* “undertake to copy and illustrate manuscripts as an act of piety and devotion”.

3. Education for national development

Education has to ignite in men patriotism, integrity, responsibility, belongingness, involvement, etc., so that they act for the national development.

During the time of Śaṅkaradeva, many people, especially from the Brahmin cast, e went to learn the Sanskrit language and literature at the educational centers like Kashi (Baranasi), Mathura, Vrindavan, Nadiya, Navadeep, Gaya, Hrishikesh, etc. Śaṅkaradeva himself had visited all those centres and undertook rigorous discourses and deliberations with the scholars of that time. He collected *Vedic*, *Upanisadic*, and *Bhāgavata-based* scriptures and acquired knowledge from those centres. This big Indian Knowledge System enriched his experience and education enormously. He composed the first ever song of his life at the Badarikasrama itself on a subject of deep realization of the fragility of life and the urgency of initiation to the Lord Rama, the Almighty. The first verses of the song are:

mana meri rāma caraṇahi lāgu/ tañi dekha nā antaka āgu, etc. (Bargīt)

‘(On behalf of all beings, the author says himself :) Oh mind, take shelter at the feet of Lord Rāma. Hast thou not seen how death is approaching thee?’ (Dutta Barua 68)

During his pilgrimage, many people were attracted by Śaṅkaradeva’s divine personality, learnedness, and oratory excellence, and took initiation in his religious ideology. In this connection, D. Neog’s (1963) observation is worth mentioning. With reference to *Svarga Khaṇḍa Padma Purāṇa* rendered by one Sārabhauma Bhattācārya, a contemporary disciple of Śaṅkaradeva, he states that Sarvabhauma has recorded a long list of disciples of Śaṅkaradeva scattered in different education centres of India, which he visited. As the colophon of Sarvabhauma presented by D. Neog (20-23), there are as many as forty-five names of such disciples. Among those important names are: Rup Sanatan of Vrindāvan, Ramakanta of Mathura, Radha of Gokul, Trijatā of Braja, Gopīnāth of Puṣkara, and

Viṣṇudatta of Jagannāth. Thus, Sarvabhauma has confirmed that ‘Śaṅkaradeva commenced his missionary work abroad during his first pilgrimage’ (Kakati 5). In this way, Śaṅkaradeva’s message was not confined to Assam alone; it was actually rooted in India and worked for the nation and for all of humanity.

In his compendium book of doctrinal treatises in Sanskrit, *Bhaktiratnākara*, Śaṅkaradeva, has dedicated one chapter to the praise of the land of *Bhārata*, named *Bhāratabhūpraśamsā*. The first verse of it is collected from the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* 5.19.21, which means, “Having births in human body in this land of *Bhārata*, proper for worship of Mukunda (Hari) for which we (the gods) have desire indeed. O, what virtues are earned by them with whom Hari himself is pleased (without any *sādhana* on their part)” (Goswami, *Bhaktiratnākara* 285). Śaṅkaradeva, by glorifying *Bhārata* in his scriptures acknowledged the Indian cultural heritage and thus, a national integration was introduced in his own place, Assam. After all, his unique ideology was not confined to the remote land of Assam only, but rather it promoted the national emotional integration among all countrymen.

4. Education for character building

Modern education in India has been greatly influenced by the philosophy of Dr. Radhakrishnan and also Radhakrishnan’s Commission of 1952. As an educationist, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has propounded valuable theories of education based on the *Gītā*, the *Upaniṣad*, and the system of ancient Indian education. Radhakrishnan has observed that education is the assimilation of values and ideas for character building and preparing to face life’s challenges. According to him, where scientific knowledge ends, the realm of mystery begins. While Śaṅkarācārya defined *jñāna* as *ātma-jñāna*, Radhakrishnan says with reference to the *slokas* 13.7-11 of *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *jñāna* includes the practice of the moral virtues. *Jñāna* is redefined as discrimination-free behaviour. According to Vivekananda, education is not only a collection of information, but something more meaningful; he felt that education should be a man-making, life-giving, and character-building process.

One of the core concepts of Śaṅkaradeva’s teaching is *Bhakti*, and the prime emphasis for practicing *bhakti* is the *śravaṇa-kīrttana* of the Lord’s name. Śaṅkaradeva propounded that the practice of *śravaṇa* and *kīrttana* makes people pure to build a strong character. In his *Kīrttana* (by verses 65-66), he enumerates seven benefits of chanting (*kīrttana*) the Name of Kṛṣṇa, such as– it (1) burns the sins, (2) evolves great virtues, (3) detaches from material desires, (4) enhances love and devotion to Kṛṣṇa, (5) induces most venerable spiritual knowledge, (6) removes illusions by burning it and (7) uplifts men to approach to the level of Almighty. Here, we can notice the basic needs of character formation. Regarding the benefits of listening or hearing (*śravaṇa*), Mādhavadeva, in his *Nām-ghoṣā* (by verse 15) states, “Just as autumn naturally clears water of all turbidity, so does Hari entering the heart of the devotee through the ear, remove all his desires” (Das, *Nām-ghoṣā* 11). Śaṅkaradeva accepts *Bhāgavata* as the resource book in formulating his ideology. Apart from rendering eight books of the *Bhāgavata* (3rd, 6th, 8th, and the 10th book partially), he has adopted various parts of it to justify his doctrine in his own works. In the 11th Book of *Bhāgavata*, Śaṅkaradeva has rendered the chapter of *Kṛṣṇa-Uddhava Saṁvāda*, where Kṛṣṇa teaches Uddhava the

righteousness to be followed in human life. Verses 214 to verse 265 comprise how Lord-Kṛṣṇa deliberates the qualities like tranquility (*śama*), restraint (*dama*), charity (*dāna*), truth (*satya*), purity (*śauca*), great value (*mahālābha*), sacrifice (*yajña*), valour (*śaurya*), who is a fool, who is wise (*pañḍita*), who is poor (*dīna*) and unhappy (*dūkhī*), who is a brave human (*śura*), what is happiness, what is sorrow, and so on. For instance, Lord Kṛṣṇa says that whoever can bear the loss, humiliation, and sorrow by praying to the Lord, that is mercy (*kṣamā*) and merciful has no defeat (*parābhava*) (verse 216). That is patience (*dharma*) when one gives up greed and desires in the name of the Lord. Who has been stable to devote to the Lord by giving up all bad habits, he has been the hero (*mahābīra*) by defeating the evils of illusion (verse 217). Śāṅkaradeva advocates these values to build up sound character in men. After Śāṅkaradeva, for around five hundred years, these values have been a living tradition among his followers. Mādhavadeva, his most beloved disciple, showed all these values in his character and lived a brave, devout life.

5. Women's education

Education is a powerful tool in the process of empowering women and liberty. Not only have to gain literacy and knowledge, but education helped them improve their social status, self-esteem, self-confidence, courage, and strength to face challenges in life. Education provides women with personal, social, economic, cultural and technological empowerment. The Constitution of India pays due importance to the status and equality of opportunity for both men and women and states, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of only religion, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them." Accordingly, the Govt. of India emphasizes women's education and has taken various initiatives to make education available to the women of India. Kothari Commission (1964-66) observed that the education of women should be regarded as a major programme in the education system. It advised special schemes and machinery to look after the education of girls and women. After continuous efforts, NEP 2020 has recommended promoting women's education through a focus on gender-inclusive and equitable education. It is targeted to: promote gender-sensitive curriculum, increase access via digital tools and local schools, enhance teacher training, and to provide targeted support (scholarships, stipends) for disadvantaged girls. NEP 2020 aimed to reduce gender gaps at all educational levels and to empower women by providing them with the knowledge and skills for personal and professional growth. In essence, NEP 2020 treats gender as a crucial cross-cutting priority, aiming to transform the Indian education system into a truly equitable and inclusive landscape for women (NEP 2020, Govt. of India document)

Though in a 17th century hagiography (*Kathā-gru-carit*), Śāṅkaradeva is ascribed to abstaining from initiation to the king, women, and ritualistic Brahmin (*Guru-Carit-Kathā* 397), there is no trace of any remark against women in the literature of Śāṅkaradeva. Rather, he can be discovered to be more conscious about women's rights, dignity, knowledge, and to be vocal against oppression. Moreover, he is found to be generous, affectionate, respectful, and democratic-minded to the female race. The sources of literature of Śāṅkaradeva were mainly the *Bhāgavata* and other *purāṇas*, the language of which was Sanskrit. When the saint poet rendered these Sanskrit works into Assamese, he took the opportunity to make the

women characters stronger than the original ones. For instance, the character of Sītā in Vālmikī's *Rāmāyaṇa* is quite generous, calm and loyal, but in Śaṅkaradeva's *Uttarā kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*, she is bold, vocal, and overreactive. Śaṅkaradeva has prepared sufficient dialogues for Sītā, by which she is outspoken to present herself like a debater. Śaṅkaradeva makes her speak:

*teve basumatī moka jānte diyā bāṭa
nacāo rāmara mukha māva melā phāta.*

(*Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* verse 384)

(O, mother Basumatī, I don't want to see the face of Rāma, please give me the route to leave this world; please make a split and open the passage.)

When Rāma senta representation to Sītā, staying at Balmiki's hermitage, to propose her return to the palace of Rāma at Ayodhyā, she then sparks:

*kisaka āmāka āura karā utpāta
pāsari āchilo dunāi agni jvāla gāta.*

(*Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* verse 298)

(I tried to forget all misfortunes, now why do you annoy me again, like putting fire on my body?)

*mai yeve jāno rāma enuvā nirdaya
lankāte tejilo hante prāṇaka niścaya.*

(*Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* verse 303)

(Had I known that he was so heartless, I certainly would have ended my life in Lanka.¹)

Sītā puts a question to Rāma (verse 373): 'What enemy am I to you, what harm did I do that you have taken so severe punishment on me?' And 'There will be no such shameless woman than me, if I return to be your wife again' (verse 377).)

By giving this type of argument on the lips of Sītā, Śaṅkaradeva makes her strong, rebellious, and rational instead of a weak, generous, and conformist woman as projected by Vālmiki in *Rāmāyaṇa*. This tendency of Śaṅkaradeva reflects his attitude towards women and concern for the freedom, justice, and equality of women in society. William Smith, in his article 'The Wrath of Sita', asserts, "What is exceptional here is Sita's reaction. Śaṅkaradeva's great sympathy for Sita's plight leads him to portray her not as the passive victim as in Valmiki, but as a person of 'flesh and blood,' justifiably enraged at the way she has been treated. He is writing a real story about real people, not about a deceptive Charade acted out by playful deities (*lila*). The point Śaṅkaradeva is trying to make is one of compassion, compassion for Rama's dilemma, of course, but much more for Sita's sufferings."²

In *Hariśchandra Upākhyāna*, the character of Śaivyā is so presented that she is the greatest of all great women. She has expressed her hardest decision to save her truthful husband Hariśchandra from the fire of anger of Viśvāmītra: Śaivyā said (verse 272), "There is no other way to pay fee (to Viśvāmītra) other than selling me; Be calm to keep your promise

¹Translation taken from W.L. Smith's article *The Wrath of Sita*

²*The Wrath of Sita* vide www.atributetosankaradeva

and try to save yourself without caring to censure of people.” Here Śaivyā is free and brave, to take her own decision for escaping from an inevitable circumstance.

Śaṅkaradeva’s dramas are some unique creations, in which certain women characters are playing dominant role. In *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, the central character Rukmiṇī sends a letter to her lover Śrīkṛṣṇa to save her soul by overlooking her brother’s (Rukmabīr) power and authority. She says, “If you fail to take me away, then I will end my life in your name of you”. Thus, Śaṅkaradeva has empowered Rukmiṇī to make her own decision and to keep her promise of dignity.

In *Pārijāt-haraṇa*, Śaṅkaradeva has presented two women having power to impose differently. Satyabhāmā is so smart that she demands Kṛṣṇa very straightly, “*he prāṇanātha, kāheka bhaya thika? Sattare pārijāta ānagiyā.*” (O! My husband, whom to be feared? Go to fetch the pārijāta quickly). Without any apprehension, Kṛṣṇa, the king of Dwārakā, fulfils her demand and takes off the flower pārijāta from the heaven, even uprooting the plant itself. On the other hand, Śacī scolds her husband Indra with the sharp words, “Oh my husband, the king of deities, your life is worthless, because you have been tolerating so many harsh words of a human-wife; you have no blood of a male at all; you are bearing a false image of Indra in front of the deities.” Thus, these two women have demonstrated their freedom of speech, thought and will-power through the writings of Śaṅkaradeva.

Suśīla Brāhmaṇa āru Caṇḍālinī Saṁvāda is a story which Śaṅkaradeva has presented in his poetic work *Bhakti-pradīpa*. Here, a lowest caste woman, Caṇḍālinī, attains to be a sincere devotee of Viṣṇu by virtue of a unique initiation to Him. But the important point of the story is the reaction of Caṇḍālinī when she incidentally meets a Brahmin named Suśīl on the bank of the river Gangā, worshipping *Indra Deva*. When she approaches the Brahmin, he prays Indra (*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 47-52) hearing which Caṇḍālinī becomes astonished and on seeing the dreadful acts of the Brahmin, she recalls Viṣṇu by touching ears with her thumbs (*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 56). On seeing a debased anti-Viṣṇu (*Hari-bimukha*) Brahmin, she takes one hundred and eight times of bathing in Viṣṇu-feet-born Gangā (*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 70), meditates by chanting thousands of Names of Kṛṣṇa (*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 71), bows down to Jagannātha falling on ground (*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 73) and prays like:

*kāya bākya mane mai tohmāra kiṅkarī
nirapāya bhakati diyoka deva hari;
tohmāra caraṇe mora nugucoka mati
tumisi suhrda nija jānilo samprati.*

(*Bhakti-pradīpa* verse 75)

(I am with my body, mind and spirit the slave of You only, O Lord. Please give me the trouble-free devotion; Let my inclination not be detached from Your lotus feet. I have learnt again that You are only the heartfelt companion of mine.)

In the meantime, the great sage Nārada comes there and asks Caṇḍālinī the reason for her meditation. She replies, “I have to talk to that hypocrite; therefore, non-erasable sin is committed to me”. On hearing such deep self-realization of Caṇḍālinī, Nārada was amazed and praised her, “You have grasped the essence of all Vedas, your caste is the best, and you are excellent. What is the scene that makes a place pure, but all beings will be purified on

visiting you (verse 93). It is good that you will be worshiped by all, but never forget that you will always be admired by me (verse 94). With enormous appreciation to Caṇḍālinī, Nārada left her place.

By this story of Caṇḍālinī, Śaṅkaradeva has made his best commendation toward the women community, their devotion, their dedication and their intellect. Śaṅkaradeva believed in the freedom of choice of women, as in the value system of modern times. In essence, Śaṅkaradeva possessed a high value of democratic attitude and open-mindedness about women, which he proved by his writings and activities in life.

6. NEP 2020 and the system of Śaṅkarī teaching

6.1 Fundamental Principle of NEP 2020 Available in the Śaṅkarī System of Teaching

(1) Promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning:

Śaṅkaradeva, in a true sense, adopted multilingualism in the teaching and learning process. He has used three different languages- Asomiya, Brajāvalī and Sanskrit in his literary works to attract different sections of people towards his teachings. The first one was popular and intelligible to the common people of Assam, the second one was popular and intelligible to the people of North-east India, and the third one was popular among intellectuals and the learned people with knowledge of the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is used in the *ślokas* of his plays, which are recited by *Sūtradhāra*, the central and leading character of *aṅkīyā-nāṭa*. Thus, Śaṅkaradeva made a layman, participated as an artist or actor, able to speak Sanskrit and Brajāvalī.

(2) Developing life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience:

Being a Dekāgiri, the chief of Bhuyās, Śaṅkaradeva showed his democratic leadership qualities in uniting people and made them work with cooperation and teamwork spirit. This spirit was more prominent in organising and enacting dramas.

(3) Creating a rootedness and pride in India and its rich, diverse, ancient traditions:

Śaṅkaradeva himself was rooted in the Vedic education of Mahendra Kandali's school, which was a place of the Indian knowledge system itself. The nature of his teaching is discussed in the above clauses, how he preaches Indian Kṛṣṇa culture, and how he praises Bhārata in his scriptures. His knowledge of the Brajāvalī language is rooted in India. Apart from dramas, his songs bear a relation with pan Indian classical music tradition.

6.2 Main Focuses of NEP 2020 and Śaṅkarī teaching

(1) Art-integration

NEP 2020 observes “art-integration is a cross-curricular pedagogical approach that utilizes various aspects and forms of art and culture as the basis for learning of concepts across subjects. This art-integrated approach will strengthen the linkages between education and culture.”

In this regard, Śaṅkaradeva is found to integrate dramas into his teaching. Also, the total outcome of the Śaṅkarī teaching is to build a cultural life system among the people. The main learning method of Śaṅkarī teaching is listening, and the teaching method is chanting,

reciting, or singing. This is a form of art, and thus, the art form is integrated both in the process and outcome of the Śāṅkarī teaching system.

(2) Language and literature

The importance, relevance, and beauty of the classical languages and literature of India cannot be overlooked. Sanskrit, while also an important modern language mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, possesses a classical literature that is greater in volume than that of Latin and Greek put together.

Śāṅkaradeva's first ever composition, '*karatala kamala kamala dala nayana....*' was in the classical language, Sanskrit. He has composed 178 hymns in Sanskrit in his six plays. He composed *Bhaṭimās* in Sanskrit and composed a book in Sanskrit named *Bhaktiratnākara*. The base of all of his literary works is the Sanskrit literature. He did not forget to emphasise Sanskrit learning through composing and rendering Sanskrit scriptures.

(3) Environmental awareness

Environment, including water and resource conservation, sanitation and hygiene; and current affairs and knowledge of critical issues facing local communities, States, the country, and the world are to be addressed by the new education to come.

Śāṅkaradeva could anticipate many of the significant teachings of modern Environmental Ethics. Environmental Ethics emerged during the period of the 1960s and 1970s, which assigns intrinsic value to the natural environment, including non-human units. The well-being of humanity is dependent on a sustainable environment. Śāṅkaradeva, through the allegories of *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, often points to the biotic communion between man and nature. Śāṅkaradeva could foresee the merits of environmental protection and the harmony of natural phenomena. He could recognize the intrinsic value in nature where man co-exists with the other. He observed that the moral obligation of man is not merely confined to his fellow beings, but also to other living beings and inanimate objects. He believes that all living beings are equal to man. Love, respect and mercy to all living species had to be maintained. He appeals:

*sakala praṇīka dekhībeka ātmasama
upaya madhyata iṭo āti mukhyatama.*

(*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1825)

(Treat all beings as yourself. Among all the ways to emancipation, this is the best.)

*kukura śṛgāla garddabharo ātmārāma
jāniyā savāko pari karibā praṇāma.*

(*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1823)

(God is immanent in the dog, the untouchable and the donkey. Knowing this, respect all the creatures.)

Eco-awareness is revealed while he describes the natural beauty of Vṛndāvana. By giving examples of the creatures of Vṛndāvana, he expresses the value of the co-existence of man and nature for the betterment of humanity. He writes:

*yakṣya rakṣa daitya braja nivāsī
pakṣī mṛgagaṇa caṇḍalo āsi. (Kīrtana-ghoṣā verse 121)*

Śaṅkaradeva's ethics, being secular in spirit, pointed to the ontological relationship between man and nature (Sharma 57).

(4) Value education

Students will be taught at a young age the importance of “doing what's right”: NEP 2020 mentions basic ethical reasoning, traditional Indian values and all basic human and Constitutional values such as *sevā*, *ahimsā*, *svacchatā*, *satya*, *niṣkāmakarma*, *śānti*, sacrifice, tolerance, diversity, pluralism, righteous conduct, gender sensitivity, respect for elders, respect for all people and their inherent capabilities regardless of background, respect for environment, helpfulness, courtesy, patience, forgiveness, empathy, compassion, patriotism, democratic outlook, integrity, responsibility, justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity, which will be developed in all students.

Śaṅkaradeva professes that the inherent goodness in men should be manifested in their social behaviour. So, he developed aesthetic senses in people through art, culture and literature. He observes that love (*bhakti*) is the motivating force for all ethical and social actions. Love, kindness, charity, hospitability etc., are positive moral virtues. In regards to values mentioned in the NEP 2020, these are mostly common in the Śaṅkarī teaching system, which are discussed in the above clauses.

(5) Indian Knowledge System

All curriculum and pedagogy, from the foundational stage onwards, will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, philosophy, geography, ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific needs, indigenous and traditional ways of learning, etc. to ensure that education is maximally relatable, relevant, interesting, and effective for our students. Stories, arts, games, sports, examples, problems, etc., will be chosen as much as possible to be rooted in the Indian and local geographic context. Ideas, abstractions, and creativity will indeed best flourish when learning is thus rooted.

The Vedic teaching-learning practices were based on the oral mode; the learners repeated the verses to memorize and practiced hard to pronounce the Sanskrit verses perfectly. *Śravaṇa*, or hearing, became a very important method of learning. In the Śaṅkarī teaching system, the same *śravaṇa* was the core. It is also the best form of devotion in the Śaṅkarī system. In Vedic education, *manana* or meditation was developed to serve two functions: for the composition of new hymns (*stotra*) through inward meditation and for the preservation of knowledge learned through outward meditation or chanting verses with careful pronunciation. This was emphasized in Śaṅkarī also, when it is said in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* (verse 340) as:

śravaṇa kīrttana smaraṇa viṣṇura
arccanapada sevana
dāsyā sakhitva vandana viṣṇuta
kariba deha arpana.

Though the meditation or *dhyana* was discouraged as it is difficult for ordinary learners, indirectly, it was unavoidable in the Śaṅkarī system to create and preserve knowledge for the

future. Śaṅkaradeva advised Mādhavadeva to write a book in *ghoṣā* style (*ghoṣā nāme prema bhakti grantha karibā* (Guru-Carit-Kathā 128, *ched* 392); *pāchat choṭa ātā guruvākya mankai ghoṣā karichanta sundarūt*(Guru-Carit-Kathā 76, *ched* 247). With deep meditation and devotion, Mādhavadeva composed *Nām-ghoṣā* with full innovative thinking, which has preserved the Śaṅkarī teaching in its proper spirit. Śaṅkaradeva himself became enriched with the knowledge and values of contemporary Bharata (India) with the best nourishment of Guru Mahendra Kandali. Mādhavadeva also studied in Rajendra Adhyāpaka's *ṭol* and became an eminent person in contemporary society. Later on, he took spiritual and ethical life education from *Guru Śaṅkaradeva*. Rāmacaraṇa, the nephew of Mādhavadeva, received education in the abode of Mādhavadeva and became a renowned biographer (*caritkār*), dramatist and a Sanskrit scholar. This type of individual mentoring is required and emphasized in the NEP 2020. The self-sustained discipline in the Śaṅkarī teaching system is equally important in present-day education.

Conclusion

From the above comparative discussion, it is seen that the Śaṅkarī teaching system has evolved in the lap of the ancient Indian education system itself, carrying its eternal values. But unlike the Vedic caste-based restrictions, it emerged as a social education to promote an egalitarian society even in the medieval period. Thus, the old Indian social and human values, which the modern education advocates to promote, are suitably found in the Śaṅkarī system. These are also reflected in the Constitution of India, with an intention to inculcate those through the instrument of education. Though the Śaṅkarī system was evolved in medieval Assam, it is found to be most practical in regard to constitutional provisions made by the Government of independent India. The relevance of the Śaṅkarī education system, in this respect, is discussed with citation in clause two above. As enshrined in the modern educational aims, the Śaṅkarī system is dedicated to pursuing democratic values like personal dignity, freedom of thought, fraternity, and brotherhood, and so on, as deliberated in the sections. The society that the Śaṅkarī system promotes is a cultural society with the practice of dramas, songs, dances, and comprehensively all art forms. These art forms, with their classical excellence and folk appeal, build a way of life that is now a part of the Indian Knowledge System as highlighted in the National Policy of Education, 2020. These are the media of Śaṅkarī education, the 'Cultural Integration' in NEP 2020. These issues are dealt with in the sections above. Śaṅkaradeva has glorified India so many times in his scriptures apart from his physical visit to the knowledge centres, and thus, he represented Assam to India and vice versa. In fact, "Assam discovered herself as an integral part of the holy land of Bhāratavarṣa and glorified in that discovery" (Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times* 378), and by this endeavour of Śaṅkaradeva, a national emotional integration has been rooted in the Śaṅkarī education system, which is the most desired aim of modern education. Śaṅkaradeva was a genius in Sanskrit- he composed books, *ślokas* and *bhaṭimās* in Sanskrit, but his education was in the vernacular medium, which is emphasized in NEP 2020.

The chief aim of the education policy of Śaṅkaradeva was to build a socialist society by developing individuals with high moral and human values. The content, process, method, medium, ways and means of education were all focused on a point to build an egalitarian

society. In the words of Vivekananda, education is a man-making and national-building process, which is an influential message to the foundation of modern education. The Śaṅkarī system of education is not an exception to this; rather, it intends to promote humanism as the highest aim of education.

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Metaphorical Dimensions of the Pārijāta Flower in Śaṅkaradeva's *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa*: A Critical Assessment

-Jyoshna Dutta *

Abstract

This paper examines how, in *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa*, the *Pārijāta* flower functions as a central metaphor that unites divine charm, emotional assurance, ego dynamics, desire, and cosmic hierarchical order. More than a narrative device, the flower operates as a spiritually charged symbol that connects heaven and earth, rendering divine truth emotionally accessible to the human mind. The study analyses how Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva employs myth to communicate psychological and devotional truths that continue to shape Assamese literary aesthetics. By tracing the responses of characters to the flower- manifested through longing, jealousy, possessiveness, and surrender- this paper demonstrates how the *Pārijāta* flower becomes a medium through which emotional vulnerability, social aspiration, and devotional consciousness are articulated.

Keywords: *Pārijāta* flower; *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa*; Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva; metaphor; symbolism; divine-human connection.

Introduction

The *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa* by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva occupies a central position in Assamese Vaiṣṇava literature for its unique fusion of mythic narrative, devotional intensity, and emotional complexity. One of Śaṅkaradeva's most significant contributions to Assamese cultural life was the development of the *Aṅkīyā-nāṭa* tradition- devotional one-act plays performed through stylised gestures, music, dance, and symbolic dialogue. Among these works, *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa* stands out as one of the most artistically and emotionally intricate compositions.

The play retells a familiar episode from the *Harivaṃśa*, narrating Kṛṣṇa's retrieval of the celestial *Pārijāta* tree from Indra's heaven. However, within Śaṅkaradeva's dramaturgy, the flower emerges far more than a narrative catalyst. The *Pārijāta* flower becomes a stratified metaphor that articulates human craving, emotional instability, social ambition, and the eternal charm of the divine. Its heavenly origin situates it within an elevated cosmic hierarchy, associating it with purity, privilege, spiritual elevation, and emotional assurance- qualities deeply desired and psychologically internalised within human experience.

When Satyabhāmā insists that Kṛṣṇa bring the *Pārijāta* tree to her palace, her demand is not merely a royal whim but an expression of deeper psychological needs- the desire to be chosen, emotionally reassured, and symbolically privileged within the domestic hierarchy. The *Pārijāta* flower thus becomes an object of reification through which emotional insecurities, superiority, and longing are rendered into a tangible form.

For Kṛṣṇa, retrieving the flower from heaven transforms into an act of emotional reassurance intended to soothe ego-driven anxiety without disrupting the cosmic order. Through this dynamic, Śaṅkaradeva demonstrates how divine objects gain meaning within the human psyche and how devotional consciousness seeks elevation through sacred possession. While the narrative centres on Kṛṣṇa's celestial retrieval of the *Pārijāta* flower from *Indraloka* for Satyabhāmā, the flower ultimately becomes the central metaphorical axis around which the play's thematic universe evolves. It establishes a symbolic junction where divine grace converges with human longing. By analysing this metaphorical function, the present study reveals how Śaṅkaradeva employs myth as a medium of emotional and spiritual expression within Assamese literary aesthetics.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse how the *Pārijāta* flower operates as a metaphor in *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa*, particularly in expressing emotional insecurity, desire, and hierarchical dynamics. It also seeks to examine how Satyabhāmā's demand for the flower reflects universal human needs for emotional reassurance and social privilege.

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis of Śaṅkaradeva's *Pārijāta-haraṇa* and its translated versions. It interprets the symbolic and metaphorical significance of the *Pārijāta* flower through literary and thematic analytical strategies, with particular emphasis on character dynamics and the socio-cultural context of the play. To support the analysis, secondary sources such as scholarly articles and critical texts on Śaṅkaradeva's works have been consulted. The approach further involves interpretative reading combined with contextual analysis in order to examine the text in terms of its psychological depth and socio-cultural meaning.

The *Pārijāta* flower is introduced not as a decorative detail but as a symbolic force that structures the emotional architect of the *Pārijāta-haraṇa*. Śaṅkaradeva presents the flower with an aura of divine uniqueness, portraying it as a cosmic object whose beauty transcends earthly comparison. From its first mention, it carries significant metaphorical weight, representing an unattainable yet intensely desired ideal that unites heaven and earth within a single object. This divine origin predetermines its emotional and symbolic transformations throughout the narrative, confirming that the flower's role is not ornamental but essential. Its journey from Indra's celestial realm to Kṛṣṇa and finally into the human courtyard traces the trajectory of Satyabhāmā's desire. In the play, desire never remains abstract; it is embodied through an object that bears emotional and social significance.

Satyabhāmā's claim: desire as demand and emotional reassurance

Satyabhāmā's longing for the *Pārijāta* flower extends beyond material possession. Its celestial origin guarantees its rarity and value, and seeking it becomes synonymous with seeking proximity to the divine. Śaṅkaradeva transforms desire into an object, demonstrating how longing becomes intelligible only when anchored in a universally recognisable symbol. When Satyabhāmā insists upon the *Pārijāta* flower, her inner emotional need is externalised as a demand for possession and symbolic superiority.

The *Pārijāta* flower thus becomes a means through which Śaṅkaradeva explores the instability and complexity of human desire. Its mobility- being desired, retrieved, planted, and praised- reveals that longing rarely finds lasting resolution. Even the fulfillment of desire fails to eliminate the emotional restlessness that produces it. On the contrary, Śaṅkaradeva suggests that attaining what one seeks may intensify emotional tension rather than relieve it. The flower, therefore, represents both the power and futility of desire.

Kṛṣṇa's retrieval of the *Pārijāta* flower is not portrayed as heroic conquest but as an act of emotional reassurance. His journey to the heavens and return with the flower functions as an unspoken language of care- a silent response to Satyabhāmā's need for validation. The flower thus ceases to symbolise passion and instead becomes a sign of emotional healing.

Śaṅkaradeva further emphasises that the true value of the *Pārijāta* flower lies not in its physical beauty but in the act of giving. The gesture of love and attention matters more than the object itself. The flower becomes a medium of emotional communication, illustrating that divine objects acquire meaning only when they strengthen human bonds. Satyabhāmā's request reveals vulnerability rather than pride, reflecting emotional insecurity and a desire for reassurance. Her turn towards a heavenly object demonstrates a universal tendency: when direct emotional expression becomes difficult, individuals often seek material symbols to communicate what words cannot.

The transformation of love into possession

A central thematic concern of the play is the transformation of love into an object of possession. When Satyabhāmā demands the *Pārijāta* flower, she seeks visible proof of Kṛṣṇa's affection, thereby converting an intimate emotional bond into a material symbol. Once love becomes objectified, it becomes vulnerable to misinterpretation, comparison, and loss. Śaṅkaradeva illustrates this fragility through the episode in which the *Pārijāta* flower ultimately takes root in Rukmiṇī's courtyard. The relocation of the flower signifies that love cannot be securely contained within material signs. The narrative warns against treating affection as property, revealing the instability and limitations of symbolic possession. The

Pārijāta flower thus transforms from a sign of devotion into a lesson on the fragility of objectified love.

The *Pārijāta* as a symbol of power and status

Beyond personal emotion, the *Pārijāta* flower functions as a symbol of social power and hierarchical positioning within Kṛṣṇa's household. Possession of a celestial flower becomes a marker of divine favour and royal prestige. Satyabhāmā's demand therefore operates as a calculated attempt to secure authority and recognition among the other consorts. The flower becomes a means of converting emotional attachment into social capital.

Śaṅkaradeva further exposes how sacred objects become absorbed into worldly competition. The *Pārijāta* flower, though divine in origin, generates jealousy and rivalry, revealing how devotional symbols are often appropriated into the politics of pride and possession. Through this transformation, Śaṅkaradeva critiques the human tendency to use sacred objects to assert superiority and social dominance. Ultimately, the *Pārijāta* flower evolves into a symbol of the complex interplay between love, devotion, power, and hierarchy. Its trajectory affirms a universal truth: when sacred objects enter human society, they acquire meanings that extend far beyond their spiritual origins.

***Pārijāta* flower as a richly layered metaphor**

The study reveals that the *Pārijāta* flower functions as a richly layered metaphor representing desire and the emotional tensions embedded within human relationships. It provides a visible form to feelings that often remain unspoken and internalised. Satyabhāmā's longing for the flower reflects a universal human need for emotional security and the desire to experience privileged recognition. Śaṅkaradeva presents this impulse not as arrogance but as a natural expression of emotional vulnerability.

The *Pārijāta* flower also assumes a significant social function, becoming a symbol of prestige and divine favour. Its possession confers visibility and influence, illustrating how material and symbolic gifts can reshape status, authority, and relational hierarchies in both private and public domains. Through this symbolic transformation, Śaṅkaradeva demonstrates how religious and divine objects acquire new meanings when situated within social contexts, evolving into instruments that regulate power, recognition, and human interaction.

Overall, *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa* employs the *Pārijāta* flower not merely as a mythic element but as a powerful metaphor that integrates emotion, devotion, and social life. Śaṅkaradeva transforms the flower into a symbolic representation of human experience, revealing how love and desire are inseparably linked to recognition, hierarchy, and social positioning.

Conclusion

In the *Pārijāta-haraṇa-nāṭa*, the *Pārijāta* flower transcends its status as a divine possession to become a powerful symbol linking human emotion with social power. The play does not treat the flower merely as a decorative or spiritual object; rather, it reveals how inner experiences such as the need for reassurance, the desire for privileged recognition, and concealed insecurities assume tangible form through symbolic possession. In this process, Śaṅkaradeva transforms a mythological narrative into a sensitive psychological study of human relationships, illustrating how individuals often rely on material symbols to express and measure emotional bonds.

The play also foregrounds the power dynamics embedded within these emotional exchanges. Satyabhāmā's desire for the *Pārijāta* flower is not limited to affection or insecurity but reflects a conscious awareness of social status and recognition within Kṛṣṇa's household. The flower's celestial origin invests it with prestige, and its possession becomes a visible marker of authority and favour. Through this dynamic, Śaṅkaradeva exposes how sacred symbols can be absorbed into worldly competition and transformed into instruments of social power.

Thus, the *Pārijāta* flower evolves from a celestial object into a layered metaphor that mirrors the emotional and social realities of human life. It becomes a symbolic lens through which the intricate relationships between love, vulnerability, recognition, and hierarchy are illuminated; reaffirming Śaṅkaradeva's enduring relevance as both a devotional poet and a keen observer of human psychology.

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Ideas of Ethical Human Development and Social Justice in Śāṅkaradeva's *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and Kant's 'Categorical Imperative'

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Abstract

The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, the *magnum opus* of the Great Assamese Medieval litterateur Śrīmanta Śāṅkaradeva (1449-1568), could be considered as a pre-modern literary site for ideas of ethical human development and social justice. Though considered as a great theological work of Neo-Vaiṣṇava Tradition in Assam, it could be examined through broader humanistic and justice oriented paradigms. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* systematically cultivates the notions of ethical character development, self discipline and moral social conduct through the path of bhakti or spiritual devotion. This study intends to align the ideas of Śāṅkaradeva in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* with Kant's 'Categorical Imperative'. Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' is an absolute, unconditional moral law which asks us to act only according to those principles that we would want to become universal laws without any conditions. 'Categorical Imperative' also insists us to treat every human being as an end in themselves. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* beautifully reflects the ideas of universal morality, inner sincerity and the profound worth of every human soul. It treats humans as a dignified entity capable of self development and growth. Thus, the basic philosophy of the text aligns with the idea of Categorical Imperative which allows us to see it as a text not only of devotional narrative but as a text which could guide us towards ethical human development and social justice. This study intends to imagine ideas of Śāṅkaradeva's *bhakti* path in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* with Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative by aligning it with the ideas of ethical human development and social justice.

Keywords: Ethical human development; social justice; Categorical Imperative; *bhakti*.

Introduction

Śrīmanta Śāṅkaradeva, born in 1449, was the polymath who shaped the structure of the present Assamese society. The existing structure of the Assamese society could not be imagined without considering the contribution of Śāṅkaradeva. Among many monumental works of his, *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is considered pivotal, as even today Assamese society takes it with utmost regards. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* beautifully articulates the theological foundations of *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* propagated by him. Composed in an accessible language with lyrical descriptions, it presents the idea of surrendering to the Supreme Deity- Kṛṣṇa-

through devotion and humility, without needing any complex ritualistic practices prevalent at that period. The text narrates the life and deeds of Kṛṣṇa, not merely to portray his supremacy but to present his life ideals to be followed by devotees and to invoke absolute devotions towards him by denouncing all other ritualistic traditions. The text promotes a direct relationship between God and the devotees; in the third chapter of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* Śaṅkaradeva says *bhakata janese mora hṛdaya/mayo bhakatara hiyā nichaya* (verse 124). That means, “Devotees are considered as the soul to the God.” The text rejects the ritualistic exclusivity and endorses a form of *bhakti* which is simpler, accessible and egalitarian in nature.

Looking beyond religious aspects, this study tries to situate Śaṅkaradeva as a pioneer of ethical human development and social justice based on the narratives present in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* demonstrates various ideas of ethical human development and social justice which resonate with the ideas of many modern theories in the domain. We could consider Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative while analyzing *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*’s basic doctrines. Kant propagated that humans must “act only accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (31). This Kantian idea of universal law formulation could be seen in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* where Śaṅkaradeva asserts that moral actions are required to be universal and equal to all. Kant claimed that a human being must always be treated as an end, never being as a means (38) resonates the idea of Śaṅkaradeva in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, where he claims that taking birth as human being is the worthiest thing and all human beings can directly take the path of its spiritual salvation, breaching all the human made barriers. This set up of direct God-devotee relationship promotes individuals as dignified identity not bound by any societal boundaries. Similarly, Swami Vivekananda’s idea that the soul is potentially divine (1:124) could be found in Śaṅkaradeva’s inclusive approach of consideration of all souls as potentially capable of achieving salvation.

The ideas of Social Justice could be traced in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* where Śaṅkaradeva envisions an egalitarian society free from social stratification based on class, caste, colour and creed etc. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* promotes the idea that devotees of Kṛṣṇa are all equal in status and *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* could create an equal society as a whole with the foundations of moral principles of devotion. Śaṅkaradeva took a stand against discriminations based on caste hierarchies deeply prevalent at that period of time; it was indeed a radical idea considering the deep rooted caste structure of Indian Society. As Ambedkar termed caste as the most degrading system of social organization (18), Śaṅkaradeva at his time itself denounced the idea of stratification based on caste and considered that all devotees irrespective of caste are equal to God. This radical departure helps in dismantling the caste hierarchies and restructuring the Assamese society in an egalitarian formation.

While considering the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* in the frameworks of ethical human development and social justice, we must consider the historical context of the text. Interpreting a text of the fifteenth century through modern lenses is not easy, considering the different set up of society in different periods. This study only intends to draw the visions of Śaṅkaradeva towards a social order based on ethical human development and social justice. Although the ideas of different theorists are invoked in the study, its intention is not to make them parallel but to show the undeniable aspects of those ideas present in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. The study aims to explore Śaṅkaradeva's visions of ethical human development in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* through the lens of Kantian Categorical Imperative, so that the ideas of Social Justice in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* may be highlighted.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies on a qualitative, interpretive and analytical approach to study *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* of Śaṅkaradeva. It takes *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* as primary text for analysis. Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative is examined and a comparative approach has been taken to find out the parallels of ideas presence in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*.

Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' and Śaṅkaradeva's *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*

Categorical Imperative is a moral obligation or command that is unconditionally and universally binding. It originated from German Philosopher Immanuel Kant, who advocated for morality, which is based on universal reason and devoid of any conditionality. Kant intended to establish a framework of universal moral law accessible to all human beings. Kant's universal law formulation judges an action's moral correctness only based on its universal applicability. If an action couldn't be universalized due to conditionality, that action should be considered as wrong. At the same time Kant considered the motivation behind an action while judging the moral worth of it. An action is only morally worth when it is performed out of duty and respect for the moral law itself without considering personal motivation and inclination. Good will to do moral action without intentions for desirable outcome could be considered as ethical in Categorical Imperative. On the other hand, in his principle of Humanity Formation, Kant argues: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (38). Kant insists that people have inherent dignity and using them as instruments for other ends violates moral principles. Here Kant advocated treatment of human beings as dignified entities rather than treating them for fulfilling any purpose.

Śaṅkaradeva's *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* could be read through the framework of Categorical Imperative given by Kant as it not only considers life of a human being with utmost regards and dignity but also recognizes that humans by themselves are capable of cultivating knowledge and salvation. Multiple ideas could be found in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* aligned with

the Kantian Categorical Imperative. In the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva propagates *niskāma bhakti*, that is, devotion without any personal motivation. His devotional path is not a means for any worldly gain rather an end in itself. In chapter six, Prahlāda prayed to Lord Viṣṇu by saying, *tohmāra akāma bhrtyā āmi/tumio niškāma mora svāmī* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 451). It means, “I am your desireless servant; you too are my Lord desireless”. The verse clearly shows the true character of devotion which is free from any desire for personal gain. A devotee takes the path of devotion as an end in itself, by doing so he also takes the path of ethical conduct as a human being. Both the devotional path and the ethical conduct in Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* ideas are deontological. A devotee takes the ethical path as a duty of a pure devotee without any outwardly motivation. This idea in Śaṅkaradeva converges with Kantian deontological logic in Categorical Imperative.

In chapter six, Śaṅkaradeva describes the worthiness of human life as *devaro vāñcanī mānuṣya janma/upajai āta yata jñāna dharmma* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 225). That means, “Human life is even desired by deities because all the knowledge and virtues could be achieved in human birth only.” This verse implies Śaṅkaradeva’s consideration of human life as an end in itself, where every human being contains capabilities of self development. It is necessary to look at Śaṅkaradeva’s approach to human capability of self development beyond religious narration. What we have to consider is the fact that he perceives the idea that all human beings are by themselves inherently capable of self development without intermediaries.

Śaṅkaradeva glorifies human life in universal terms without any considerations of hierarchies or divisions. Again, in the chapter six, he mentioned that *yakṣa rakṣa strī sūdra yata vrajavāsī, pakṣī mṛgo Viṣṇu bhaila kṛṣṇaka upāsī* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 381)- these verses reiterate that all people of Vraja, from lower caste or creed, women, animals and birds become divine with their devotion to Kṛṣṇa. It shows the universal potentiality of devotion propagated in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. In the chapter twenty six, the almighty Kṛṣṇa advises his favourite devotee Uddhava- *sakala prāṇika dekhibeka ātmasama/upāya madhyata iṭo āti mukhyatama* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1825) - which means “The best approach to treat every human being is to see them as yourself.” These words, directly from the mouth of the almighty Kṛṣṇa, become highly valuable for Śaṅkaradeva’s followers. Devotees are asked to treat every other living being as they treat themselves. This approach of treating every living being as equals and dignified identity resonates with the idea of treating human beings as an end in itself and never merely as a means (Kant 38). Śaṅkaradeva’s idea of devotion is universal in nature as it includes everyone with the intention to follow the *bhakti* path. In the chapter three, Śaṅkaradeva says *smaroka mātra hari dīne rāti, nabāchai bhakati jāti ajāti* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 129), meaning, “Chant the name of Almighty day and night, devotion never discriminate between caste and outcaste”. Here also, we could identify the universality

of the *bhakti* path propagated by Śaṅkaradeva. Devotion is beyond narrow sentimental identity formation; rather, it is universal and doesn't alienate any group or individual. The *bhakti* path of Śaṅkaradeva is open and inclusive to all human beings which take it closer to the Kantian idea of universality of morality.

The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* treats human beings as divine in itself. In multiple places of the text Śaṅkaradeva reiterate the idea that the soul or the core composition of human being is inherently divine. *Jīva amśe tumi praveśilā gāve gāve/āve āmi tohmāka bhajoho sarvvabhāve* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1655) - this verse means that the "Almighty enters in parts of every living being, so all the devotees should surrender themselves to Him." The idea that almighty is present in every living being highlights the inherent divinity of human beings in *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. This inherent divinity bestows human beings the potentiality to transform itself to higher self. The divine portrayal of human beings again denotes Śaṅkaradeva's approach to treat all human beings as an end in itself which links his philosophy with Kantian Categorical Imperative

The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* morally guides devotees for ethical human development. Through direct instructions, metaphor and narratives based on Kṛṣṇa's life, Śaṅkaradeva aims to guide his followers towards the path of an ethical human life. His moral guidance is not intended only for the spiritual salvation purpose, rather it aims for creation of a society where human beings live a life with humility in heart, and kindness for all living beings and treat everyone as equal. Greed, ego, selfishness and attachment occur due to illusory pursuit of human desire, and it leads to endless suffering individually and causes divisions in the society. Hence, Śaṅkaradeva propagated a path of devotion with humility and renunciation of pursuits based on greed and ego.

In chapter eleven, Śaṅkaradeva says *dehata yāra nāhi ahaṅkāra/tārese karmmata gucai vikāra* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 971). That means, "Obstacles don't exist for those who have no ego in their body." Renunciation of ego and practice of humility are primary for devotion in Śaṅkaradeva's teaching. Through the story of the "Gajendra Upākhyāna" of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, the importance of renunciation of ego is portrayed beautifully. In that *upākhyāna*, the elephant who thinks himself as omnipotent fails to get rid of the mouth of a crocodile. He escapes only after he realizes the fragility of his ego and prays to Lord Vishnu with humility. While describing the character of Prahlāda, the great devotee of Lord Viṣṇu, Śaṅkaradeva writes: "*indriyaka karilā niyama / prāṇika dekhanta ātmasama* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 320), meaning, Prahlāda regulated his senses and treated every soul as himself. The verse teaches the importance of regulation of sensory desire, as unregulated sensory desire causes obstacles for human development. The verse also advocates the virtue of treating everyone as equal. Treating everyone with humility and kindness is one of the primary propagations of Śaṅkaradeva for ethical human development. In the same chapter itself,

Narasimha avatāra (reincarnation of Viṣṇu), praises Prahlāda by saying, *nakare prāṇika hīmsā nāhi eko sprhā/āhmāta arpaṇa kare apunāra dehā* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 460), meaning “Prahāda is not violent towards other living being and don’t have any desire; he has surrendered his body to the Almighty.” This shows the primacy of non-violence in Śāṅkaradeva’s teachings. He discouraged violence and desires which could harm others.

Śāṅkaradeva uses the metaphor of lotus repeatedly. In “Gajendra Upākhyāna,” the elephant prays holding a lotus by the trunk, “*śuṇḍe meḍhāi padmagoṭo oparaka tuli/gajendre śaraṇa lailā trāhi hari buli* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 505). Here, lotus is used as a metaphor for purity. Lotus sends a message to the devotees that they should be like lotus, pure and unblemished, even when surrounded by the evils (Borkakaoti). Śāṅkaradeva taught devotees to be detached from selfish and illusory desires. In chapter nineteen, a verse says, *anā cintā save pariḥarā, michā mora mora buli marā* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1475); this verse advises to get rid of worries and not to die with the false belief that everything belongs to you. Here, Śāṅkaradeva enlightens his followers that all their worries are due to their selfishness and attachment. The world is transient and doesn’t belong to anyone; having selfish attachment is futile and, therefore, devotees are asked to practice detachment and thinking beyond selfish bondings.

All these examples of moral guidance of Śāṅkaradeva’s *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* portray his ideas of ethical human development by treating humanity as an end in itself. His moral framework is applicable to all without any hierarchical divisions. This universality of his moral framework supports our approach to read the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* with the idea of Categorical Imperative. As human dignity, equality, and moral characters are given primacy in Śāṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* path; it creates a framework for ethical human development for mankind, even in the pre-modern era itself.

The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is a text of a time where social hierarchies were rigid and moral degradation was prevalent. The fragmented society practiced regressive socio-religious activities which were unjust and inhuman. Caste difference was one of the major aspects of that time. Only the sons of Brahmin and Kāyaṣṭha families could be enrolled in a *Tol*, the then residential school (Borkakoti). The tribal people were alienated from the mainstream culture, causing greater rift between the tribal and the non-tribal. Religious practices of that time included *tantra-mantra*, idol worship and even human sacrifices. The Brahmin intermediaries monopolized religion and made the spiritual aspects exclusive to the privileged section. In this, Śāṅkaradeva propagated his *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* and implanted ideas of social justice among people which could be found in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*.

The idea of social justice in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is based on the basic principle of equality of souls. In chapter twenty six, a verse says, *kukura śṛgāla garddabharo ātmārāma, jāniyā savāko pari karibā praṇāma* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1823). The verse asks to recognize

that God exists in the souls even of a dog, a jackal and a donkey, so bow to all living beings. This verse clearly denotes the basic principle of equality of not only human beings but also of other living beings, which could lead to the formation of an egalitarian society with basic social justice. In chapter twenty six, Kṛṣṇa advises Uddhava that *brāhmaṇara cāṇḍālara nibicāri kula* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1821), meaning, “Never ask whether one is high born or low born.” The same verse says, “*nīcata sādḥuta yāra bhaila ekajñāna/tāhākese paṇḍita buliya sarvvajana* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1821). That means, “Everybody recognizes the one as wise who treats the pious and the mean as equal.” These two verses from the mouth of the God himself denote the radical departure towards equality and the intention to dismantle the caste hierarchy that existed in the society of that time. Śaṅkaradeva in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* outwardly rejects the idea of stratification based on caste as God himself only recognizes devotion without considering any society made stratification. In both the chapters of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, “Bali-chālana” and “Prahlāda-caritra,” two great devotees of Kṛṣṇa- Bali and Prahlāda- are shown to have born in demonic clans but due to their devotion both becomes dearest to the Almighty. These two chapters show the potentiality of removal of barriers in the *bhakti* tradition. *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*’s recognition of every human being as equal without any stratification is a great leap towards social justice.

Śaṅkaradeva made his religion accessible to the downtrodden classes who were otherwise excluded from the spiritual arena due to Brahminical monopoly and complex ritualistic traditions. He made rituals so simple that even a person without any resources could find the way for spirituality. The verse *bhakata sakale pūjai phule jale/tuṣṭa hao tāke pāi/abhakate yadi nānā dravya deya/tāto mora tuṣṭi nāi* (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1594) says: “if a devotee prays to the Lord with only a simple flower and water, He get satisfied with that; but if anyone who is not a devotee prays even with costly things, He never gets satisfied.” This verse shows Śaṅkaradeva’s intention to create a society where religious ideology could never be monopolized. Śaṅkaradeva unlocked the idea of an egalitarian religion where individuals of all castes or classes could directly pursue spirituality without dependency on ritualistic monopoly. Marx argues that class divisions are sustained by ideological systems of the ruling class which naturalize inequality (Marx). Śaṅkaradeva targeted the ideological structure of religion which promoted inequality. He tried to dismantle the class hierarchies and ritual based exclusivity by promoting community based collective devotional path where everyone was treated with equal status.

Śaṅkaradeva also promoted high status for women. There is a strong message in the chapter “Rasa Krīḍā” where the Gopīs revolt against suppression- “That the Gopīs came out of their house at night all alone to meet lord Kṛṣṇa was a powerful message to all those people who suppressed women” (Borkakoti). In the chapter twenty six, Kṛṣṇa advises Uddhava that *strī śūdro karai yadi āmāta bhakati/tāhāta kahibā iṭo jñāna mahāmati* (*Kīrtana-*

ghoṣā verse 1826), meaning “if women and the low castes offer devotion to God, tell them the content of this great knowledge.” In a time when women were excluded from religious domains, Śāṅkaradeva encouraged women to get into the path of devotion.

All these aspects entertain the fact that Śāṅkaradeva’s *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is a text which envisions egalitarianism in a time of social inequality. His visions in the text place him as a pioneer of social justice in the pre- modern age.

Conclusion

This study explores the relevance of Śāṅkaradeva’s *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* through the lens of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, ethical human development, and social justice, highlighting the saint's profound contributions to a life of dignity and egalitarianism. While acknowledging the complexity of interpreting a medieval text through modern theoretical frameworks, the author endeavors to uncover the text's potential for fostering a deeper understanding of human values. Śāṅkaradeva's vision for an ethical and egalitarian society is undeniable, and his reformative efforts in the Brahmaputra valley have indeed contributed to the region's relative freedom from caste differences and ethnic conflicts, distinguishing it from other parts of the country. By examining the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* through this lens, this study aims to illuminate the saint's enduring legacy and its continued relevance in contemporary times.

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Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract

This research paper intends to describe the environmental consciousness of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva from philosophical point of view. It tries to establish that in Śaṅkaradeva, pantheism, animism, Nature, and the *Brahmaṇa* are all integrated in his philosophy which in our modern sense, we call environment. Though environment is a modern conception, and Śaṅkaradeva was not aware of such a development as a science that succeeded him, we can look for such a study in his writings and find out a philosophy out of such study. We could have prevented many global issues such as climate change, desertification, biodiversity loss, pollution, sea level rising, ice melting, global warming, ozone layer depletion etc. if we had paid any heed to what he had written in his compositions. Although he did not articulate a formal “environmental theory,” his worldview resonates deeply with modern ecological ethics. His reverence for life aligns with the bio-centric principles of thinkers like Albert Schweitzer, while his communal simplicity parallels Gandhian environmental thought. The central idea that human welfare cannot be separated from nature's welfare is implicit in his teachings. His ecological consciousness can therefore be described as a spiritual environmentalism- one grounded in the harmony between the divine, the human, and the natural.

Śaṅkaradeva's legacy transcends religion and culture; it encompasses an enduring message of ecological balance and sustainability. Through his life, art, and reformative zeal, he demonstrated how devotion to God can coexist with devotion to nature. Though he lived centuries before modern environmentalism emerged, his teachings anticipate many of its central principles. For present and future generations, Sankaradeva remains not only a saint and reformer but also a pioneer of environmental consciousness whose relevance endures in the quest for a sustainable world.

Key words: Śaṅkaradeva, environment, nature, compassion, sustainability.

Introduction

When we speak of environmentalism, we usually think of modern ecological movements, scientific awareness, or policy debates. Yet centuries before the rise of modern environmental science, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568) of Assam articulated a worldview and organized social practices that reflect profound respect for nature. Though he never used the modern term “ecology,” his philosophy, artistic creations, and community institutions embody a consciousness remarkably close to contemporary environmental ethics.

Śaṅkaradeva lived in fifteenth–sixteenth century Assam, a region shaped by rivers, forests, and fertile plains. Society at that time was characterized by the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups, folk traditions, and Brahmanical rituals. Practices such as *śākta* and *tāntrika*

worship, involving animal sacrifice, were widespread. Into this environment, Śaṅkaradeva introduced a new religious movement based on *bhakti* to Lord Kṛṣṇa, emphasizing ethical living, devotion, and equality.

His reformist faith, the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, rejected ritualism and caste barriers, promoting compassion, simplicity, and community worship. Through the *Kīrtana*, *bargītas*, and *bhāonās* (devotional drama), he propagated a religion that also protected the environment- discouraging violence toward animals, encouraging the use of local materials, and cultivating harmony with the natural world.

This essay treats Śaṅkaradeva as an environmentalist- not in the technical sense, but as a thinker whose life and teachings express harmony among human beings, nature, and the divine. His *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, his *Kīrtana* and *bargīta*, his *aṅkita-nāṭas*, and the institutions he founded- the *thān* or *satras* and *nāmgharas*- together reveal an ecological sensibility grounded in spiritual awareness and social practice. The study, therefore, seeks to study the writings of Sankaradeva from the environmental point of view.

His philosophical vision of nature

1. Unity of the Divinity and Nature: In Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, there is no separation between the Divine and His creation. In the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* declares:

*namo namo mādhava vidhira vidhidātā /
tumi jagatara gati mati pitā mātā //
tumi paramātmā jagatara īśa eka /
eko bastu nāhike tomata vyatireka//
tumi kārya kāraṇa samaste carācara /
suarṇa kuṇḍale yena nuhike antara //
tumi paśu pakhi surāsura taru tṛṇa /
ajñānata muḍajane dekhe bhinna bhinna//*

(*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verses 519, 520)

(*Trn.* I bow down to Mādhava, creator of creator; He is Saviour, Intellect, Parents of the world. You are Soul Supreme, sole God of the world; except You nothing real is there to be accounted. You are the Cause and Effect of all animate-inanimate; as in gold and earring lies the same content. You are beasts, birds, divine beings, demons, trees and grass; the fools see them as different due to ignorance)

This monistic outlook affirms that the entire universe- animals, birds, trees, rivers, mountains- is filled with the same divine essence. To injure nature, therefore, is to violate the Divine. Such a perception fosters reverence and restraint toward all beings, turning ecological balance into a sacred duty.

2. Eco-centrism in His Imagination: Śaṅkaradeva's compositions express an eco-centric vision in which nature participates in divine experience. In his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, he celebrates the serenity of autumn—the clear sky, the delicate light of the full moon, the music of enchanting flute. Nature here is not a mere backdrop but a living participant in God's *līlā*, the Divine play. He describes:

*śarata kālāra rātri āti bitopana
rāsa krīḍā karite kṛṣṇara bhaila mana;*

*bhailanta udita candra purvva diśā hante
kāmātura strīra yena sāntāpa mārjjante.*

.....
*vanako dakhile candra raśmiye rañjita
suśvara mādihura kari hari gāila gīta.*

(*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verses 807, 809)

(*Trn.* The autumnal night was full of charms; Kṛṣṇa desired to have divine sports. From the eastern side was appearing the moon as if to reduce affliction of amorous women. Hari saw the forest shining with moon-rays; He began to sing songs in attractive tunes.)

By situating divine moments amid natural settings- Kṛṣṇa's flute on the banks of the *Yamunā*, his dance in *Vṛndāvana*- Śaṅkaradeva shows that joy, divinity, and ecology are inseparable. Humanity, in his thought, exists within- not apart from the rhythms of nature.

Ethical dimensions: compassion and restraint

1. Non-violence and Compassion:

Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* replaced violent rituals with the worship of Kṛṣṇa through *nāma* (chanting). By rejecting animal sacrifice, he protected countless lives and reaffirmed the sanctity of creation. His ideals of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *dayā* (compassion) extended moral concern to all living beings.

He declares:

*kukura śṛgāla gaddarbaro ātmā rāma
jāniyā sabāko pari karibā praṇāma*

(*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1823)

(*Trn.* Down on ground, bow unto the dog, the ass and the jackal, knowing it well that their souls are but the Supreme Soul)

This compassionate spiritual ethic can be regarded as an early form of ecological morality. By linking devotion with non-violence, Śaṅkaradeva made reverence for life a moral and religious responsibility.

2. Simplicity and Sustainable Living:

His institutions, the *nāmgharas* and the *satras*, were built from bamboo, wood, cane, and clay- all renewable materials available locally. This simplicity reveals a principle central to sustainability: live within the limits of one's environment. Śaṅkaradeva discouraged luxury and waste. Through modest design and collective labour, his communities practiced what would now be called sustainable development. Spiritual humility thus found physical expression in environmental restraint.

Ecology in art, music, and literature

1. Nature in the *āṅkita-nāṭa* and *bhāonā*:

Śaṅkaradeva's *āṅkita-nāṭas*, such as *Cihna-yātrā*, *Keli-gopāla*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* etc. unite theology with natural imagery. They depict forests, rivers, and groves of *Vṛndāvana* alive with birds, deer, and trees in full bloom.

The *bhāonā* performances presented in *satra* precincts use masks (*mukhā*) and costumes crafted from clay, bark, fiber, and vegetable dyes- materials derived from the

natural environment. These artistic practices exemplify ecological awareness. The open-air *nāṭaghara* (theatre hall), illuminated by earthen lamps also mirror simplicity and harmony with nature.

2. Nature in the *bargītas*:

The *bargītas*, or great songs, also called “songs celestial” or “noble numbers” depict seasonal changes, rivers, flowers, rain, clouds etc. Nature becomes a metaphor for divine rhythm. The sun, moon, and *padma* (lotus) symbolize purity and transcendence. Through such imagery, Śaṅkaradeva cultivated devotion grounded in ecological appreciation- a poetry of reverence for the living world. One such example of a *bargīta* is:

Dhruv: *māi mādhava virāhe harāya cetanā tanu
jīvana nā rahe*

Pada: *cānda candana manda malaya samīre
keśava vine biṣa vāriṣe śarīre
ghana ghana hānaya madana pañcavāṇa
kukila kuhu kuhu lehu meri prāṇa
pañkaja pāta ahita hima vāri
madhukara nikara karaya mahāmāri
aicana samaye madhupurī piu prāṇa
kṛṣṇa kiṅkara rasa saṅkara bhāṇa.*

Translation:

Refrain:

In separation from Mādhava (Kṛṣṇa), I have lost consciousness;
Life no longer remains in my body.

Verse:

The cool breeze from sandalwood forests blows gently;
(But for me,) O Keśava, it feels like poison pouring over my body.
Thick clouds rumble- the five arrows of Kāma strike me fiercely;
The cuckoo’s “kuhu kuhu” call steals away my life-breath.
Cold water falls upon the lotus leaves- it feels unbearable;
And the swarm of bees creates a great affliction (with their hum).
At such a time, in the city of Mathurā (Madhupurī),
Saṅkara, the servant of Lord Kṛṣṇa, sings his enchanting song.

Social institutions and ecological practice

1. The *nāmghara*: Community and Stewardship:

The *nāmghara* serves as the moral and spiritual heart of Assamese villages. It functions not only as a place of worship but as a collective forum for social decisions and education. Often surrounded by groves and ponds, it stands within a living ecosystem. The design of the *nāmghara*- open walls for ventilation, thatched roofs for monsoon protection, bamboo columns for resilience- embodies traditional ecological knowledge. Its maintenance by the community nurtures a sense of shared responsibility for both people and nature.

2. The *satra*: The Monastic Ecology

The *satras*, founded by Śaṅkaradeva and organized by Mādhavadeva, developed as a centre for spiritual learning and self-sufficient living. The *bhakatās* (monks) cultivated crops, tended gardens, wove cloth, and managed sacred ponds. Their livelihoods rested on the principles of cooperation and minimal ecological footprint. The *satras* thus became an ideal model of a sustainable community, integrating spiritual life with environmental care and productive simplicity.

Dialogue between reason and nature

Śaṅkaradeva's theology blends rational understanding with spiritual humility. In his *Eka-śaraṇa* philosophy, *śaraṇa* (surrender) means recognizing one's dependence on the divine essence present in all creation. Ignorance (*avidyā*)—the failure to perceive this unity—leads to exploitation and suffering. Liberation (*mokṣa*) lies in realizing the interdependence of all life.

Such understanding generates gratitude and restraint, virtues essential for an ecological conscience. For Śaṅkaradeva, knowledge without reverence is incomplete; reverence without knowledge is blind. Harmony between the two forms the foundation of both spiritual and ecological well-being.

Cultural ecology: livelihood and craft

Śaṅkaradeva integrated art, livelihood, and spirituality into one ecological order. Craftsmen, weavers, potters, and musicians participated in devotional activity by using natural materials sustainably:

- i. The *pāṭa* (silk cloth) for paintings came from local silkworms.
- ii. Natural dyes were produced from plants and minerals.
- iii. Musical instruments such as *khola*, *tāla*, and *dabā* were made of bamboo, clay, leather.

By connecting craftsmanship to worship, Śaṅkaradeva created a culture that valued both creativity and conservation. Art became a form of ecological awareness rooted in devotion.

Equality, justice, and environment

Śaṅkaradeva's message of equality embraced all living beings. Rejecting caste hierarchy, he included marginalized groups- fisher folk, cultivators, artisans- in his spiritual community. Because these people depended directly on nature, the preservation of the environment was inseparable from social justice.

Thus, in Śaṅkaradeva's movement, protecting rivers, forests, and land meant protecting livelihoods and dignity. Ecology, ethics, and equality formed a single moral continuum.

Limitations and context

Śaṅkaradeva was not an environmental scientist, and his writings contain no technical guidance on conservation or climate. Yet the social and moral system he founded fostered ecological balance. By sanctifying ponds, groves, and rivers, discouraging violence, and encouraging local material culture, he created a living tradition of environmental harmony.

His movement shows that ecological wisdom can emerge not only from science but also from spirituality, culture, and collective habit.

Contemporary relevance

Assam today faces deforestation, erosion, and ecological instability. Śaṅkaradeva's values offer practical and moral solutions. The *nāmgharas* and *satras* can serve as community centres for environmental education, linking religious devotion with ecological stewardship.

Sacred groves attached to these institutions continue to preserve biodiversity and can be recognized as community conservation zones. His model of bamboo and clay architecture provides guidance for eco-friendly building. Reviving *bhāonā* and *bargīta* with environmental themes can inspire rural audiences to revere the natural world. Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* transforms ecology into a form of devotion, teaching that the earth itself is sacred.

Comparative perspective

Śaṅkaradeva's ecological vision shares kinship with Buddhism and Jainism in its emphasis on compassion and non-violence, and anticipates the Gandhian ideal of simple living. Yet it differs from ascetic traditions by celebrating life through art, music, and community.

Aesthetic spirituality

Śaṅkaradeva's spirituality is profoundly aesthetic. For him, *saundarya* (beauty) and *bhakti* (devotion) are inseparable. He found divine delight (*ānanda*) in the *padma*, in rivers, in birdsong, and in the play of sunlight. His art and music make beauty a path to awareness and care for nature. In today's mechanical view of ecology, Śaṅkaradeva's aesthetic spirituality reminds us that protecting the environment is not merely an ethical duty but a joyful participation in divine creation.

Conclusion

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was not an environmentalist in the scientific sense, yet his teachings and institutions embody the essence of ecological consciousness. Through *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hai-nāma-Dharma*, he proclaimed the unity of all existence; through *bhakti*, he taught compassion for every being; through *nāmghara* and *satra*, he created sustainable communities; and through his art and music, he celebrated nature as divine revelation.

In the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, he declared that God dwells in all beings, erasing the boundary between human and natural life. In his practice of *Kīrtana*- the devotional expression through song and praise- he gave voice to the harmony of creation itself.

In an age of ecological crisis, his message is timeless: live simply, act with compassion, and preserve the earth as a sacred trust. Śaṅkaradeva's life thus bridges spirituality and sustainability, offering humanity a luminous model of ecological harmony rooted in devotion.

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Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva

The Social Reformer and the Architect of the Assamese Society

-Dr. Hiramani Haloi*

Abstract

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) was a visionary saint, philosopher, and reformer who shaped the moral and cultural foundation of Assam. His influence transcended the boundaries of religion and literature, creating a comprehensive reform movement grounded in spiritual humanism, social equality, and artistic innovation. This paper explores Śaṅkaradeva's multifaceted role as a social reformer within the socio-religious context of medieval Assam. It analyzes how his *Ekaśaraṇa-nāma-dharma* movement transformed Assamese society through religion, art, education, and ethics. Drawing upon his theological writings, dramatic literature, and institutional creations such as *nāmghars* and *satras*, this study situates Śaṅkaradeva not merely as a saint but as the architect of the Assamese society whose reformative ideals continue to resonate in the modern world.

Keywords: Society, Assam, Śaṅkaradeva, social reformer, architect

Introduction

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's name stands among the most illustrious in the religious and cultural history of India. A saint, poet, dramatist, philosopher, and reformer, he remains a towering figure whose influence continues to define Assamese identity. His era, the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, was a time of intense socio-political and religious turmoil in the Indian subcontinent. Feudal fragmentation, caste rigidity, ritual excess, and the decline of ethical values characterized much of the social landscape. In such a milieu, Śaṅkaradeva's vision of *Ekaśaraṇa-nāma-dharma* emerged as a spiritual and social revolution.

Through his reformative zeal, Śaṅkaradeva addressed not only the metaphysical but also the moral and material needs of his people. His teachings offered a way out of superstition and social hierarchy, establishing a religion of simplicity, equality, and devotion. This paper examines his contribution as a social reformer who used religion, art, and humanistic ideals to reconstruct the Assamese society on the foundations of moral purity and cultural unity.

Historical and social context

To understand Śaṅkaradeva's reform, one must first examine the historical condition of medieval Assam. During the fifteenth century, the Āhom dynasty had consolidated political control, but society was fragmented by caste-based discrimination, tribal divisions, and religious orthodoxy. *Tāntrika* practices, magical rituals, and elaborate sacrifices dominated the religious sphere (Neog 25). The masses were excluded from spiritual life as *Brāhmaṇical* ritualism became the privilege of the elite. Moreover, the advent of Islamic rule

in parts of India had created both cultural contact and conflict, making the search for spiritual unity more urgent.

It was in this atmosphere of moral confusion and ritual degeneration that Śaṅkaradeva initiated his reform movement. His travels across India exposed him to the teachings of Caitanya, Rāmānanda, Kabīra, and other *bhakti* saints (Barua 42). Yet, unlike his contemporaries, Śaṅkaradeva localized the *bhakti* ideal within the cultural idiom of Assam. His movement was not merely devotional; it was an all-encompassing reform that addressed the moral, cultural, and social life of the Assamese people.

Philosophical foundation of Sankaradeva's reform

At the heart of Śaṅkaradeva's reform lies the philosophy of *Ekaśaraṇa dharma*- the religion of taking refuge in one God. It advocates exclusive devotion (*bhakti*) to Lord Śrīkr̥ṣṇa, who is regarded as the Supreme-Being. The philosophical foundation of this faith draws from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, particularly its emphasis on *Bhakti-mārga* (the path of devotion) as the ultimate means of liberation. However, Śaṅkaradeva's interpretation of *bhakti* was distinct in its ethical and social dimension.

He rejected the multiplicity of gods, idol worship, and complex rituals, promoting instead the chanting of God's name (*nāma*), communal worship, and moral conduct as the essence of religion. His *Ekaśaraṇa* doctrine centered on four essential practices: *nāma* (chanting), *deva* (worship of one God), *guru* (spiritual teacher), and *bhaktata* (association of devotees). Through these four pillars, Śaṅkaradeva redefined spirituality as a shared social act rather than an exclusive priestly ritual (Śarma 113).

This new interpretation carried a radical egalitarian message. It implied that devotion, not birth, determined spiritual worth. In rejecting caste hierarchy, animal sacrifice, and ritual pollution, Śaṅkaradeva democratized religion and paved the way for social integration.

Religious and ethical ideals

Śaṅkaradeva's reform was profoundly ethical. His religious message was not confined to personal salvation but extended to the cultivation of social virtues such as compassion, humility, and tolerance. His writings in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and *Bhakti Ratnākara* emphasize moral qualities like truthfulness, non-violence, and devotion to humanity. "The true devotee," he wrote, "does not harm others; speaks the truth, and treats all beings as manifestations of God" (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 359).

He envisioned religion as a moral discipline, guiding the conduct of both individuals and communities. His condemnation of intoxicants, gambling, and falsehood reveals his concern for the ethical degeneration of society. Moreover, his emphasis on *satsaṅga* (spiritual community) established a collective moral consciousness among the Assamese people. Through the *nāmghar* institution, he created spaces where ethics and spirituality merged into social practice.

Śaṅkaradeva's ethical teachings were also deeply inclusive. He accepted disciples from every social class- from *Brāhmaṇas* to tribal communities- thereby breaking the shackles of caste and birth. This inclusivity laid the foundation of a moral democracy in Assam, centuries before modern egalitarian principles took root.

Institutional and cultural contributions

One of Śaṅkaradeva's most enduring contributions as a reformer lies in his creation of social and cultural institutions. The *nāmghar* (village prayer hall) and *sattra* (monastic institution) were not mere centers of worship; they were laboratories of moral, cultural, and educational reform. The *nāmghar* functioned as a village parliament where people assembled for religious discourse, collective decision-making and artistic performances. It became the nucleus of community life, fostering unity, equality, and moral discipline (Neog 211).

The *thān* or *sattra* system, founded by Śaṅkaradeva and expanded by his disciple Mādhavadeva, served as centres for spiritual training, literature, music, and drama. These institutions not only preserved his teachings but also ensured the continuity of Assamese culture. They promoted social solidarity through shared participation in devotional practices, art, and education. The egalitarian character of the *nāmghar*- open to all, irrespective of caste or gender- embodied the very essence of Śaṅkaradeva's social reform.

Art, Literature, and performance as tools of social reform

Śaṅkaradeva's genius as a reformer was inseparable from his artistic creativity. He understood that art could reach where sermons could not. His literary and performative works became the vehicles of his reformative vision. Through his *bargīts* (devotional songs), *ankīyā-nāṭs* (one-act plays), and *bhāonās* (religious dramas), he communicated profound theological ideas to common people in simple, poetic language.

The *bargīts*, composed in the *Brajāvalī* language, are devotional lyrics that express the soul's longing for divine union. Their musical beauty attracted people from all social backgrounds, creating a shared aesthetic and spiritual experience. His *ankīyā-nāṭs*, such as *Cihna-yātrā* and *Pārijāta-haraṇa* combined music, dance, and dialogue to dramatize moral values and divine principles. These performances staged in public spaces, transformed art into an instrument of social education (Barua 98).

In creating the *bhāonā* tradition, Śaṅkaradeva also democratized artistic participation. Everyone, regardless of social position, could act, sing, or play instruments. This participatory art form broke the monopoly of elite culture and turned performance into a collective celebration of faith and community.

Moreover, Śaṅkaradeva's visual art- including masks, manuscripts, and decorative motifs- reflected an indigenous aesthetic rooted in moral purpose. His integration of literature, performance, and visual design established a holistic art form that served both spiritual and civic functions.

Śaṅkaradeva's egalitarian vision and humanism

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Śaṅkaradeva's reform lies in his humanistic worldview. His religion was not merely a matter of divine devotion but of social responsibility and human welfare. His acceptance of all communities, including marginalized groups like the *Kaivarttas* and the *Marāṅs*, was revolutionary for his time. By rejecting caste and priestly privilege, Śaṅkaradeva laid the groundwork for an ethical humanism based on equality, dignity, and fraternity.

His vision also carried a subtle socio-political dimension. By organizing society around *nāmghars* and *satras*, he decentralized moral authority and fostered self-governance. These institutions became democratic spaces where decisions were taken collectively- a prototype of civic democracy rooted in spiritual values (Goswami 176).

Furthermore, his emphasis on education and moral training transformed the Assamese village into a centre of ethical and intellectual life. The recitation of scriptures, communal singing, and dramatic performances all served pedagogical purposes. In this sense, Śaṅkaradeva's reform anticipated modern concepts of social education and cultural citizenship.

Lasting social and cultural impact

The impact of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's social reform is vast and enduring. His *Ekaśaraṇa dharma* reshaped the Assamese identity, integrating diverse tribes and communities into a single cultural fold. The moral discipline and artistic vitality of his movement gave rise to a distinctive Assamese civilization characterized by tolerance, cooperation, and creativity.

In the centuries following his death, the *satra* and *nāmghar* systems have become the backbone of Assamese rural life. They have preserved not only religion but also education, art, and social organization. The moral code he established continues to influence the values of the Assamese society, promoting harmony across social boundaries.

His reform also inspired subsequent reformers and thinkers in India. The inclusivity of his movement parallels the universalism of Kabīra, Nānak and Caitanya, yet remains uniquely Assamese in its expression. Modern scholars regard Śaṅkaradeva as the architect of the Assamese Renaissance- a precursor to India's later social and cultural awakening (Sarma 219).

Even in the modern age, when globalization threatens to erode traditional values, Śaṅkaradeva's ideals retain their relevance. His message of unity amidst diversity, of moral action over ritualism, and of art as a means of spiritual elevation continues to inspire educators, artists, and reformers alike.

Conclusion

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's life and work embody the confluence of religion, art, and social reform. As a saint, he redefined spirituality as a moral and communal pursuit. As a reformer, he transformed Assamese society through egalitarian ideals and institutional innovation. As an artist, he gave his message an enduring aesthetic form that continues to shape the Assamese imagination.

His *Ekaśaraṇa- nāma-dharma* was not merely a doctrine of faith but a blueprint for moral civilization. By dissolving caste distinctions, simplifying religious practice, and elevating art to the level of moral instruction, Śaṅkaradeva initiated a silent revolution that continues to resonate across centuries. In his synthesis of faith and reason, devotion and equality, he stands among the great reformers of world civilization.

Śaṅkaradeva's legacy is thus both spiritual and civic. He envisioned a society guided by truth, compassion, and aesthetic joy- a society where devotion to God was inseparable

from love for humanity. His reform movement, sustained through *nāmghars* and *sattras*, remains the living heart of Assamese culture, an ever-flowing source of moral strength and creative vitality.

In the grand narrative of Indian civilization, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva emerges not only as a saint of Assam but as a universal teacher of humanism- one who taught that the true measure of religion lies not in ritual but in righteousness; not in hierarchy but in harmony.

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Educational Philosophy of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Holistic Learning and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Every religious tenet in India is grounded in a distinct philosophical framework, and Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) also bequeathed a profound and enduring philosophy to posterity. A versatile genius of medieval India, Śaṅkaradeva envisioned education as a transformative process aimed at the holistic development of the individual. His life, activities and philosophy possess immense academic value. His contributions to art, culture, religion, and literature continue to inspire generations. His educational philosophy emphasized the integration of spiritual, moral, intellectual, cultural, and social development, thereby fostering a balanced personality enriched with ethical values. Śaṅkaradeva advocated inclusive learning that transcended caste, creed, and gender, promoting social harmony and equality. His approach blended traditional wisdom with practical knowledge, encouraging creativity, community participation, and devotion through accessible vernacular education.

The present paper discusses the educational philosophy of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and highlights his visionary approach to holistic learning, which is applicable to contemporary society. His educational philosophy elucidates its core principles, which might be integrated with the present-day educational frameworks.

Keywords: Educational philosophy, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, holistic development, *satra*, *nāma*

Introduction

Education is the soul of any civilization, and in India's rich spiritual and cultural heritage, it has always been intertwined with ethical living, social responsibility, and spiritual realization. In the fifteenth century A.D., India was in the throes of a major religious and social upheaval. Saints, religious leaders, and social reformers across different regions sought to put an end to excessive ritualism, rigid social hierarchies, and social evils, such as caste discrimination. Through the *Bhakti* movement, they endeavoured to promote a sense of oneness, devotion, and universal brotherhood among the people.

This spirit of religious ferment was active throughout the subcontinent, and the easternmost region of India was no exception. In Assam, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva gave a tremendous impetus to neo-Vaiṣṇavism. He propagated a faith, which is known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma* or *Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma* in popular imagination. His *Bhakti* movement emphasized exclusive devotion (*eka-śaraṇa*) to a single Supreme Deity, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, expressed through the chanting of His divine Name (*nāma*) and Virtues. Śaṅkaradeva sought to abolish caste divisions in religious and social life, spread the message of universal

brotherhood, and communicate spiritual ideas in the Assamese language rather than Sanskrit, which at that time remained confined to a privileged few. By doing so, he laid the foundation for the growth of Assamese literature and popular religious education (Goswami 1).

Philosophical foundations of Śaṅkaradeva's educational ideas

Śaṅkaradeva's educational philosophy was deeply rooted in morality, spirituality, equality, and cultural refinement. Influenced by the broader *Bhakti* movement and the Upaniṣadic ideal of self-realization, he believed that true education should enlighten the individual through devotion to the Supreme Being. Education, in his view, was not merely the acquisition of information but a process of character formation and inner transformation. Thus, a central aim of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy was the cultivation of ethical values and social harmony. It is, therefore, no wonder that his *magnum opus Kīrtana-ghoṣā* begins with *Caturviṃśati-avatāra*, which is an elucidation of the twenty four incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, followed by the *Nāma-aparādha* section or offences against *Nāma*, which is a warning to those who dare to oppose the Names and Virtues of Lord Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. The verse number 40-47 of the *Nāma-aparādha* section is sufficient to make a disciple stand upright in social conduct: "There are rogues who try to deceive the world; they are ever proud and conceited in all their deeds. There are drunkards, sycophants, debased ones that indulge in harsh words at all times. People attached to children, wives, wealth, and also the most sinful ones and all degenerate- all are redeemed from sins, if they take refuge in Hari's feet. Hari is all merciful, God Supreme- all animate-inanimate are emancipated by Him. Against Him there are persons who conspire- even they are forgiven if absorbed in his prayer. The most degenerate ones among men who commit grave offences against Hari, if they take refuge in Hari's *Nāma*, the *Nāma* washes away all sins of them. Dearest to everyone is Hari's Name; whoever commits sins against the same, there is no means to save him at all- he is sure to have an abysmal fall." Verse number 48 states "The men that decry Hari-devotee is *Nāma*'s worst enemy." Verse number 50 states "The sinful that neglects his preceptors, and also decries Vedas at times, is subject to suffering, without any way out". Verse number 51 states, "The person that disputes on Hari's *Nāma*, also decries the essence of *Nāma*, is deemed to be a notorious *Nāma*-offender; he is doomed to rot in hell with no life after". Thus, Śaṅkaradeva's teachings promote ethical purity of human beings. It is also no wonder that a person who is ethically upright can only be a good citizen, and this is what Śaṅkaradeva sought to achieve. For Śaṅkaradeva, all human beings, and animals even, are manifestations of the same Divine Reality, and therefore there could be no inherent difference between one person and another- *āpuni sṛjilā carācara dehā yata, samasta aiśvaryabhāve āchā samastata; jīva amṣe tumi praveśilā gāve gāve, āve āmi tohmākā bhajoho sarvvabhāve*. (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1655). This spiritual egalitarianism was translated into an educational vision that was inclusive and humane.

Śaṅkaradeva strongly advocated accessibility in education. He believed that learning should be available to all, irrespective of caste, gender, or social class. By preaching in Assamese and translating sacred texts into the vernacular, he democratized knowledge and laid the groundwork for vernacular education in Assam. His efforts challenged the monopoly

of Sanskrit learning and made religious and moral instruction intelligible to the common people.

Overview of Śaṅkaradeva's methods of teaching

Śaṅkaradeva's educational philosophy centred on holistic development- intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and social- while emphasizing inclusivity and social harmony. Education, for him, was a means to awaken the masses both spiritually and socially. He admitted people from diverse communities into his fold and instructed them equally through the principles of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva innovated the idea of *nāmghar* as a community prayer centre, but indirectly it also served as an educational institution; it focused on the study of scriptures, devotional practices, thereby cultivating compassion and ethical conduct. Additionally, dance and drama were practised here, which acted as powerful pedagogical tools, making education experiential, joyful, and culturally rooted.

Although there had been no fixed curriculum for his *bhaktas* by today's standard, Śaṅkaradeva's approach to curriculum was comprehensive and pragmatic. Broadly, it may be understood as comprising two interrelated components: general education and vocational or skill-based education. The general curriculum included basic literacy skills (the three *Rs*) imparted through recitation of the scriptures of the sect as well as other relevant literature. Through this curriculum, learners were encouraged to develop intellectual clarity, moral judgment and spiritual insight. The vocational curriculum included training in dance and drama (*aṅkīyā-nāṭ*), songs (*bargīt*), playing musical instruments such as the *khol*, *tāl*, and *ḍabā*, etc, mask-making, manuscript preparation (*sāṅcipāt*), painting, weaving and other crafts. Such training fostered self-reliance, aesthetic sensibility, and respect for manual labour. Sanjib Kumar Borkakati states, "The religious order established by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva continued to sponsor this art form even after he passed away. Each residential unit... had its own artist called *khanikar* who was engaged in doing different art works like preparing masks, preparing the costumes, engraving wood panels, illustrating the manuscripts, etc... Thus it became a whole time profession for these people, albeit as a religious work" (91-92). His pedagogical methods were innovative for their time, relying on storytelling, artistic expression, music, dance, and collective participation. Learning was dialogic, participatory, and community-oriented rather than rote and authoritarian.

Literary and artistic contributions as educational tools

Śaṅkaradeva's literary works provide valuable insights into his educational ideals and methods. Texts such as the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and *Bhakti Ratnākara* are not merely devotional compositions but also pedagogical instruments. The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is a collection of devotional songs for congregational prayer, the idea of which may also be utilised for better learning in modern education. These songs convey religious and moral teachings in an accessible and emotionally engaging manner. Similarly, the *Bhakti Ratnākara* presents stories and teachings that address moral dilemmas, righteous conduct, social responsibility, and spiritual growth. The stories of the sacred texts, such as the two Hindu epics, were often dramatized through *aṅkīyā-nāṭa*, serving simultaneously as moral instruction, cultural

transmission, and entertainment. Through such performative pedagogy, Śaṅkaradeva transformed education into a lived cultural experience.

Thān-Satras and Nāmaghars as centres for community learning

The *thān-satras* and *nāmaghars* served as vital centres for community learning in Assam's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite tradition. These institutions may be compared with the churches of Christianity in terms of their religious function, although their (*thān-satras* and *nāmaghars*) functions extend far beyond worship.

The *thān-satras* are self-sustaining, autonomous institutions dedicated to the overall religious, social, cultural, and educational development of the community. They function as centres of universal learning, imparting both formal and informal education to children and adults. Within the *thān-satras*, discussions on philosophy and ethics are conducted, contributing to the intellectual development of the people. Many *thān-satras* maintain *ṭols* and *catuṣpāthīs* for Sanskrit education, ensuring the transmission of classical knowledge alongside vernacular learning.

The *thān-satras* also play a crucial role in preserving and promoting Assamese classical art forms, such as *sankari-sattriyā* dance, *bargit*, and *aṅkīyā-nāṭ*, etc.. They function as residential schools under the guidance of a spiritual head known as the *Satrādhikār*. The disciples of the faith, called *bhakatas*, receive training in literature, music, dance, drama, philosophy and spirituality. The *nāmaghar* functions as a congregational prayer hall and a democratic community space. It provides a forum where people from all sections of society can gather, deliberate and resolve minor disputes, thereby fostering social harmony. *Nāmaghars* also serve as informal schools where villagers learn about religious texts, history, and cultural practices. The famous Barpeta *kīrtanghar* stands as a prominent example of the enduring social and educational role of the *nāmaghar*.

Śaṅkaradeva was a humanist of the highest order who sought to build an egalitarian society based on solidarity, unity, and integrity. He relentlessly opposed caste discrimination and untouchability, bringing diverse sections of society under the single religious canopy of neo-Vaiṣṇavism. Through the institutions of *thān-satras* and *nāmaghar*, he created spaces that nurtured equality, participation, and collective identity. For over five centuries, these institutions have preserved Vaiṣṇavite art, culture, and traditions in their original form. As community halls and centres of moral authority, they have contributed significantly to maintaining peace, harmony, and social cohesion in the Assamese society.

Relevance of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy for modern education

Śaṅkaradeva's educational philosophy remains highly relevant in the contemporary context. His emphasis on holistic education that integrates moral, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions aligns closely with modern educational ideals. In an age marked by materialism and value erosion, his insistence on ethical and moral development offers crucial guidance. His vision of inclusive education resonates strongly with the modern principle of "Education for All." By transcending caste, gender, and class barriers, Śaṅkaradeva anticipated contemporary concerns with equity and social justice. His philosophy also

supports cultural integration and respect for diversity, contributing to the formation of responsible global citizens.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with its focus on the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), holistic development, vocational education, moral education, and cultural integration (4), finds strong resonance with Śaṅkaradeva's vision. His use of arts, crafts, and vocational skills, exemplified by traditions such as *bhāṇā*, *aṅkīyā-nāṭ*, *sankari-sattriyā* dance, and the famed *vṛndāvanī vastra*, offers valuable models for integrating creativity, skill training, and cultural heritage into modern curricula.

Conclusion

The educational philosophy of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva represents a unique and holistic vision that integrates spiritual, moral, intellectual, cultural, and social development. His educational thought was inseparable from his religious and social reform activities, and its relevance extends far beyond its historical context. By emphasizing inclusivity, cultural preservation, ethical values and community participation, Śaṅkaradeva laid the foundations of a humane and value-based educational system.

Incorporating his philosophy into contemporary educational policies and practices can help nurture responsible, compassionate, and enlightened citizens capable of addressing the challenges of a diverse and complex world. In an era of globalization and rapid modernization, Śaṅkaradeva's ideals remind us that true education lies not merely in the accumulation of facts but in the formation of character and the enlightenment of the spirit. His educational philosophy, therefore, remains profoundly relevant even today.

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Contributions of Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva to the Cultural Landscape of Hajo, Assam

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Abstract

Hajo has been an important religious and cultural centre of Assam since ancient times, marked by a strong temple-centric tradition. Within this setting, the visit and brief stay of Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape of the region. Despite doctrinal differences between Neo-Vaiṣṇavism and the ritual practices of the Hayagrīva–Mādhaba temple, Mādhavadeva’s presence at Hajo attracted large numbers of devotees, including temple functionaries and *sevāits*. Through *nāma-prasanga*, religious discourses, devotional songs, and dramatic performances, he introduced congregational and egalitarian religious practices that enriched the existing traditions. His influence continued through the activities of his disciples, particularly Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi and his sons, who established *satras* and spread Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in and around Hajo. The preservation of sacred sites, artefacts, and folk songs associated with Mādhavadeva in the Dhoparguri *satra* and the Mādhaba temple reflects his lasting impact. As a result, Hajo emerged as an important centre where temple-based religiosity and Neo-Vaiṣṇava cultural traditions coexist and interact. The study intends to explore how Mādhavadeva’s presence and teachings penetrated popular consciousness and reshaped the religious and cultural landscape of Hajo, Assam.

Keywords: Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva, Hajo, neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Dhoparguri *satra*, cultural landscape.

Introduction

Hajo is one of the holy places in Assam as well as India. It is called *pañcatīrtha* because it is the seat of five major pilgrimage sites of the Hindus. They are Hayagrīva–Mādhaba, Kedāreśvara, Kamaleśvara, Kāmeśvara, and Gaṇeśa. Along with the Hindu pilgrimage sites, Poā-Mecca is another holy shrine for the Muslims. Buddhists have also associated many of its shrines, including that of Hayagrīva–Mādhaba, with their religious traditions. Hajo, thus, serves as a confluence of three major faiths- Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Beyond its diverse religious establishments, Hajo has played a significant role in the propagation and popularization of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism led by Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva, enriching the cultural heritage of the region. The historic Dhopargurī Satra remains an important centre of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith.

Hajo has a rich religious and cultural heritage that has attracted scholars, migrants, and saints since ancient times. The pilgrimage sites of Hajo were once vibrant centres of learning where scholars and saints gathered in large numbers. Apart from visiting the

pilgrimage sites, one of the purposes of pilgrimage was to meet scholars and saints and to discuss religion, philosophy, and culture among themselves.

It is stated that Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva visited Hajo several times. According to the *Kathā Guru Caritā*, the saint visited the pilgrimage site of Hajo on the advice of Asurārī Brāhmaṇas (*Kathā Guru Carita* 340-341), although it is difficult to believe that proposition, since there have been immense doctrinal differences between what Mādhavadeva followed in his religious principles and what the Hayagrīva-Mādhava temple upholds.

The Hayagrīva Mādhava temple, along with other sacred sites, has occupied a significant place in the devotional consciousness of pilgrims for at least a millennium. The arrival of Mādhavadeva at Hājo can be traced back to nearly five hundred years ago. Doctrinally, the ritual practices and modes of worship followed at the Hayagrīva Mādhava temple were markedly different from those upheld and propagated by Mādhavadeva. This divergence reflects a broader ideological tension between older forms of Vaiṣṇavism and neo-Vaiṣṇavism, despite the fact that the object of worship remained the same- Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. The present study seeks to examine how Mādhavadeva gradually permeated the popular imagination and how this process, in turn, contributed to shaping the religious and cultural landscape of Hājo, Assam.

Methodological framework

One of the inherent complexities of historical inquiry is that interpretations of events often vary from one historian to another. Neo-historicism, therefore, attempts to minimise such interpretative biases. However, the present study adopts a largely linear historical approach, relying primarily on the *Kathā Guru Caritā*, a medieval hagiographical text that records significant episodes from the lives and activities of Śaṅkaradeva, his disciple Mādhavadeva, and their followers. In addition, secondary sources such as historical narratives, scholarly monographs, research articles, and local records have been consulted to examine the religious practices, institutional developments, and material culture associated with Mādhavadeva at Hājo.

Establishment of Dhoparguri Satra and propagation of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism

When Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva was in Tāntikucī (Barpeta), the *bhaktas* (devotees) used to visit him from Hajo to listen to his preaching, undertaking a difficult journey. Understanding the troubles of the *bhaktas*, the saint asked them not to come to Tāntikucī anymore, as he decided to make a new arrangement at Hajo itself. He also assured that he would send his favourite disciple, Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi, to make an arrangement for *nāma-prasāngā* (congregational prayer) by establishing a *satra*. Accordingly, he sent Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi to build a three-room house at a suitable place in Hajo. Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi, under the instruction and initiation of Mādhavadeva, established a *satra* of three rooms with bamboo and thatch in cooperation with the *bhaktas* of Hajo on the southern bank of the river Lakhatorā under a big *dhop* (banyan) tree in 1587 A.D. (Das 28).

After the completion of the construction of the *satra*, the Aṭoi sent four *bhaktas* to Tāntikucī to bring saint Mādhavadeva. Mādhavadeva set out on his journey for Hajo on a boat with a team of *gāyana-bāyana* (singer-musicians) and other companions in 1588 A.D.

During the period of his stay at Hajo, he staged the *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-bhāṇā* with the *gāyana-bāyanas* who accompanied him and with assistance of the local artistes in a temporary *pāṇḍāl* erected under the *dhop* tree. Mādhavadeva entrusted Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi with the responsibility of the *satra* and conferred upon him the charge of *Satrādhikāra*, i.e., the head of the *satra*. Following Mādhavadeva's guidance, Aṭoi began to propagate the *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* throughout the Hajo region.

The saint stayed at the Dhoparguri *satra* for three months, preaching too many people before returning to Tāntikucī. When the time came for his departure, Aṭoi led Mādhavadeva to the bank of the Rāmsotā, chanting *nāma-kīrtana* (congregational prayers) along with his disciples. After returning, Lakṣmīkānta noticed with astonishment that the footprints of Mādhavadeva had miraculously appeared on the rock where Mādhavadeva had stood for some time. In deep reverence, Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi placed the rock (*pāda-śilā*) in the *kīrtanaghara*. It is regarded as the most sacred object of the *satra* and is ceremonially brought out from the *kīrtanaghara* during important functions for devotees to be adored. After the saint's departure, disciples from near and far began flocking to the Dhoparguri *satra*, marking the beginning of the rapid expansion and popularization of *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* in the region.

Saint Mādhavadeva came to the Dhoparguri *satra* for the second time when he came to the place of Kaṇṭabhūṣaṇa of Leṅgāmāgurī. He spent a night at the *satra* during his visit (Medhī 39). According to the *Carit*, when Mādhavadeva was in Tāntikucī (Barpeta), he was once captured by Koch king Raghudeva at the instigation of the opponents of the devotees and was taken to the capital Vijayanagara for interrogation by the king. But at the last moment, due to the intervention of Paṇḍit Siddhānta-Vāgīśa, Mādhavadeva and his followers were honorably released (Sarma 17). Mādhavadeva was deeply saddened by the insulting remarks made by the opposing Brāhmaṇas and by Sūrānanda, a royal officer. After consulting with the devotees, he decided not to remain there and sent them to the king to request a peaceful and secluded place for his stay (*Kathā Guru Carita* 448). Although the opposing Brāhmaṇas conspired to send Mādhavadeva to Gokula, Mathurā, or Vṛndāvana, the king, after consulting some honest advisors, ultimately instructed him to reside in the sacred land of Hajo (*Kathā Guru Carita* 449).

Mādhavadeva at Rāmdiā and his propagation of *eka-śaraṇa*

As directed by the king, the saint visited Hajo for the third time in 1593, traveling by boat along the Luit (river Brahmaputra). On this occasion, he kept his boat on the bank of the Rāmsotā, also known as Rambālī or Rāmdiā near Hajo (*Kathā Guru Carita* 450). Within a few days, word spread that Mādhavadeva was staying on the sands of Rāmdiā (Rambālī) and people began to gather around him. Accompanied by Dimā Bāyana, Jagannātha Gāyana, and others, the saint conducted *nāma-prasanga* and *nāṭa-bhāṇā*, drawing large crowds (*Kathā Guru Carita* 451). Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi not only participated in the *nāma-prasanga* but also took personal care of the saint. As a result, a deeply devotional atmosphere prevailed, marked by discourses on holy texts, performances of *nāma-kīrtana*, devotional songs and gatherings of devotees. Mādhavadeva, a brilliant artist and the foremost leader of song, dance, and drama after Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, inspired great admiration. The singers of Hajo sought to

learn musical instruments from him and upon witnessing his exceptional skill; many regarded him as divine (*Kathā Guru Carita* 452). The sacred land of Hajo grew even more vibrant in the presence of Mādhavadeva and devotees continued to flock to the Hajo-Rāmdīā region in large numbers.

During Mādhavadeva's stay, the number of devotees coming to meet him soon surpassed those visiting the temple itself. This naturally displeased a section of people who were waiting for an opportunity to complain about him to the biased king. Therefore, on the advice of his well-wishers, Mādhavadeva decided to leave the eastern Koch kingdom and seek a more congenial environment in the western Koch kingdom ruled by King Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa (Sarma 17).

Impact of Mādhavadeva on the religious and cultural traditions of Hajo

Mādhavadeva's stay at Hajo was not very long in terms of time, but this incident seems to have left a significant impression on the religious and cultural traditions of Hajo on the one hand and on the life and work of Mādhavadeva on the other. The religious heritage of Hajo from the distant past and the religious ideals preached by Śaṅkaradeva were two major traditions in Assam at that time. A scholar and insightful man like Mādhavadeva understood that the coexistence of two great traditions could be conflicting. Mādhavadeva may have realized Hajo as a suitable place for a synthetic attempt to spread the ideals of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism.

According to the *Carit*, many people of Hajo took refuge in saint Mādhavadeva during his stay at Hajo. Many of the officers, including Menā and Meṭerī, as well as a number of *sevāits*, that is, tenants of temple land given free rent (Das 141) were among them. Therefore, perhaps to avoid the wrath of the Koch king, the patron of the Hayagrīva-Mādhaba temple at that time and to avoid creating a gap between the temple and the people, devised some co-presence in the rituals and festivals of the temple. The Dhoparguri *satra* and the Hayagrīva-Mādhaba temple have several monuments dedicated to the renowned saint Mādhavadeva. The *pāda-silā* of Mādhavadeva, ancient manuscripts, artefacts, etc., are still preserved in the Dhoparguri *satra*. Likewise, some folk arts and songs along with some items used by Mādhavadeva are also preserved in the Mādhaba temple. A song believed to have been composed by Mādhavadeva continues to be sung in the Mādhaba temple. The song has long been part of the folk tradition of Hajo for a long time and carries special cultural and devotional significance. A few lines of the song are-

*mādhava vaikuṅṭhanātha trijagata pati
darśane hare pāpa paraśe mukuti
pṛthivī-maṅḍale hajo nāmata nagara
tāhāra vitare maṅikūṭa giribara ... (Das 50).*

(*Tran.*: Mādhava, the Lord of Vaikuṅṭha, is the Master of the *trijagata*. One, who visits Him, will be free from any sin. There is a town on the earth known as Hajo where the Maṅikūṭa hill lies.)

During his stay at Rāmdīā, Mādhavadeva received an invitation from the mother of Koch king Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa, and then he decided to return to Coochbehar. With a view to bid

farewell to him, the people of Rāmdiā assembled at Bhāṭhelī khalā (the place where the Bhāṭhelī festival is held) with a cultural procession on the sixth day of the Assamese month of Bohāg in 1589 A.D. Since then, the Bhāṭhelī festival has been celebrated at Rāmdiā as a symbol of respect to the saint.

After Mādhavadeva's return, Lakṣmīkānta Aṭoi continued conducting *nāma-prasanga* and delivering religious discourses to the devotees who gathered at the Dhoparguri *satra*. In due course, devotees from Aboypur, Dādhī, Sualkuchi, South Siṅgrā, and Burkā requested Aṭoi to establish *satras* in their respective localities. Aṭoi entrusted his capable son Sanātana with the responsibility of establishing the Dādhī *satra* and spreading the faith. He also founded a *satra* at South Siṅgrā, for which he received the ring once worn by Mādhavadeva. His fourth son, Ananta Aṭoi, established a *satra* at Sualkuchi and devoted himself to religious preaching and he was presented with the cow and the five-faced bell donated by the king. Aṭoi's eldest son, Puruṣottama, founded a *satra* at Abaypur and was given the *pīrā* (a small plank of wood with four legs, used for sitting purpose) where Mādhavadeva had once sat and taken meals. Aṭoi retained his third son, Narottama, at the Dhoparguri *satra* to continue its spiritual activities.

Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva's stay in the greater Hajo region transformed the area into an important centre of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism and cultural activity. Even today, the *satras* of Hajo and its surrounding areas continue to play a vital role in shaping the cultural landscape. The *bhakata-Vaiṣṇavas* actively promote Vaiṣṇavism throughout the region, through religious initiation, discourses, congregational prayers, dramatic performances and various other forms of propagation, thereby fostering a vibrant *sankari-satriyā* environment. Every year, festivals such as *Śaṅkara Janmotsava*, the *tithis* (death anniversary) of the great saints, *Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī*, *pāl-nāma* and others festivals are observed with deep devotion, drawing numerous visitors and devotees from across the country and abroad.

Conclusion

It was not an easy task to propagate Neo-Vaiṣṇavism at Hajo, where a temple-centric culture has prevailed since ancient times. However, the *aṅkīyā-nāṭ* and *bargīt* (celestial songs) written and composed by saint Mādhavadeva had already created a spiritual and cultural revolution across the state. This revolutionary movement also reached the blessed land of Hajo, as a group of *bhakata-Vaiṣṇavas* was attracted to Neo-Vaiṣṇavism.

The footprints of Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva at Hajo significantly enriched the religious and cultural landscape of the region. As a result, the number of people visiting the *satra* became greater than those visiting the Mādhava temple. People even used to say that it was better to visit living Mādhavadeva at the *satra* than the lifeless Mādhava at the temple. In this way, the saint deeply impressed the people of Hajo. It may be said that the regular discourse of the holy book *Bhāgavata* in the temple premises has been a direct contribution and impact of saint Mādhavadeva.

Several Vaiṣṇavite poets and scholars, including Ananta Kaṇḍalī, propagated Neo-Vaiṣṇavism at Hajo in the later period. Ranta Pāṭhak, the father of the Vaiṣṇavite poet Ananta Kaṇḍalī, served as the interpreter of the *Bhāgavata* in the premises of the Mādhava temple. Similarly, Rāmasarasvatī, another well-known poet born at Pachariā under the Hajo Revenue

Circle, contributed tremendously to the field of Vaiṣṇava literature. The above discussion clearly establishes the arrival of the saint at Hajo, his stay there and the propagation of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism at Hajo and its adjoining areas.

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Re-visiting Śaṅkaradeva: Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir in Manipur

-Dr. Biswajit Kalita*

Abstract

This paper re-examines the historical, cultural, and religious connections between Assam and Manipur through a focused study of the Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir located at Yumnam Huidrom village near Imphal. Drawing upon historical chronicles, scholarly interpretations, field observations, and comparative cultural analysis, the study argues that the temple represents a localized and transformed memory of the *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* tradition associated with Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva of Assam. Although present ritual practices at the site are not identical with classical *Sankarī* traditions, architectural features, iconographic elements, ritual peculiarities, and oral histories strongly suggest the migration and indigenization of Assamese Vaiṣṇava culture in Manipur. By situating the temple within the broader historical context of Ahom-Manipuri political alliances, migration routes, and reciprocal cultural exchanges, the paper seeks to illuminate a neglected chapter in the trans-regional history of Vaiṣṇavism in Northeast India.

Keywords: Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, Assam-Manipur relations, *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir, cultural migration.

Introduction

Assam and Manipur share a long and complex history marked by political alliances, matrimonial relations, warfare, migration, and sustained cultural interaction. Before India's independence, both regions existed as princely states, maintaining diplomatic and cultural relations with one another. Assamese sources refer to Manipur as the *Mekheli* country (Bhuyan, *Tripura Buranji* 22), while the Manipuris were known in Assamese chronicles as *Mogloos* (Nath 82). As immediate neighbours, the two regions inevitably influenced each other's social, religious, and cultural formations, a fact amply evidenced by Ahom *buranjis* and Meitei royal chronicles.

While much scholarly attention has been devoted to political and military interactions between Assam and Manipur, relatively little focus has been placed on the transmission of religious ideas, particularly the spread of *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* beyond Assam. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining a little-known shrine in Manipur- the Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir- which may preserve the memory of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva in a localized and transformed form.

Methodological framework

The present study adopts a contextual approach to history, which seeks to understand past events by situating them within their specific socio-cultural, intellectual, and political environments. The study is based on textual sources, secondary scholarship, and direct field observation. The initial impetus came from an article by Professor Birendranath Datta, who

drew attention to the existence of a ‘Sankardev Mandir’ in Manipur and raised the possibility of its association with Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (Datta 1987). Motivated by this suggestion, the author undertook a field visit to Yumnam Huidrom village, located approximately twenty kilometres from Imphal, to examine the temple, its rituals, and local perceptions regarding its origin.

The Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir¹: site, structure, and rituals

The temple at Yumnam Huidrom bears the name “Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir,” inscribed in Bengali script. In Manipuri usage, *ebodhou* signifies ‘great grandfather,’ a term often associated with ancestral reverence. Architecturally, the structure bears a striking resemblance to the Assamese *nāmghara*. The sanctum sanctorum is separate from the main prayer hall and positioned at one end, while the central roof is flanked by veranda-like extensions on either side.

Inside the sanctum sanctorum stands an idol depicting a monk seated in a meditative posture. The presence of wooden footwear (*kharam*) placed beside the idol and a walking staff further accentuates the ascetic character of the figure. The idol is draped in saffron-coloured cloth, while a white *chandratāp* canopy hangs above it. Such iconographic features seem highly unusual in mainstream Manipuri temple traditions.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the idol is its headgear, which closely resembles the headgear worn by the *Sutradhāra* in *ankiyā-bhāonā* performances or by members of the *gāyana-bāyana* ensemble in *Sankarī* musical traditions. Ritual practices at the temple also diverge from local norms. Offerings consist solely of pulses, grams, and fruits, with no evidence of animal sacrifice or elaborate *pūjā* rituals. The priest officiating at the temple wears a pure white *dhoti* and a white silk cloth around the neck, closely resembling the attire of Assamese *bhakatās* who wear the *gamochā*. Notably, candles rather than earthen lamps are used for illumination.

Despite these distinctive features, the local villagers possess little concrete knowledge regarding the temple’s origin. Even when queried about elements associated with *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, no definitive oral tradition could be recovered. Nevertheless, the cumulative evidence strongly suggests that the temple preserves a localized memory of Assamese Vaiṣṇava influence.

Historical context: Assam-Manipur relations

The plausibility of Assamese religious influence in Manipur is reinforced by extensive historical evidence of sustained contact between the two regions. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records that in 1536 the Manipuri king sent a bride to the Ahom king Suhungmung, followed by reciprocal exchanges of gifts and envoys in 1537 (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 131; Gait 98 vide Singh Jhalajit, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 31). These matrimonial and diplomatic exchanges established enduring channels for cultural transmission. Rajmohan Nath records this episode and holds that the Manipuri king Kabomba (1523-1541 A.D.) tried to extend his kingdom and, in this effort, conquered a portion of

¹ The author visited the temple in question under the auspices of IGNCMA Major Research Project titled “Re-visiting the Vaishnavite Renaissance in North East India” taken up by Prof. Archana Barua, former HoD, IITG.

Cachar under the Tipperah king. The Ahom king Suhungmung was busy at the time with the Kacharis, whom he had just driven out from their capital at Dimapur, and fearing troubles which might arise out of the probable coalition of the Kacharis with the Manipuris, he hastened to present the Manipuri king Chaomen with Khukdang of the Lan-mukhra family along with a substantial dowry (Nath 90; Devi *Ahom-Tribal Relations* 190). The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the receipt of the elephants from the Ahom king Suhungmung, but no bride. The name of the elephant, according to this chronicle, is Tekhao Ngamba (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 31-32).

Relations intensified during the reign of Jayasingha (Bhagyachandra) of Manipur and Rajeswar Singha of Assam in the eighteenth century. Following Burmese invasions, Jayasingha sought refuge and military assistance from the Ahom court, cementing ties through matrimonial alliances, including the marriage of Princess Kuranganayani to Rajeswar Singha (Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations* 191). Subsequent Ahom military expeditions to Manipur, though fraught with hardship, underscore the depth of political and cultural entanglement between the two states. Further interactions occurred during the Moamoria rebellion, when Gaurinath Singha sought military assistance from the Manipuri king. Manipuri troops actively participated in suppressing the rebellion, reinforcing the notion of reciprocal political dependency and cultural exchange.

Migration routes and cultural transmission

Beyond royal alliances, migration played a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange. P.C. Choudhury identifies four² major migration routes connecting Assam with neighbouring regions, one of which passed directly through Manipur and Cachar (Choudhury 75). The frequent clearing and maintenance of this route, as recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, indicate sustained movement of people, goods, and ideas (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 29-31). Manipuri immigration texts such as *Mayang Tekhāo* record the arrival of individuals from Assam, including one Govinda Manik, during the reign of Ningthoukhomba (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 30). Kapila Vatsyayan similarly notes the settlement of Brahmins and other groups from Assam and Bengal in Manipur from the fifteenth century onwards (Vatsyayan 37).

Such movements inevitably carried cultural practices with them. Dress patterns, musical instruments, ritual objects, and linguistic terms reveal striking affinities between the two regions. Items such as the Assamese *sorāi*, *kharam*, *khār*, and musical instruments like the *khol* find close counterparts in Manipuri culture (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 41-42). The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records that one king of Assam, whom Jhalajit Singh supposes to be Purandar Singha, sent a message to the Manipuri king Narasingh requesting to send a physician to Assam. In reply, Nara Singh sent a physician to treat the king of Assam, whereupon, out of gratitude, the king of Assam sent two combs of ivory to Nara Singh and

² The first route was through the north or the mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan; second through the valley of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra from India and the West; third by sea or the Bay of Bengal, passing through Bengal or Burma, and fourthly the Assam-Burma routes, one over the Patkai passes into the North-East, leading from the Lidu-Margherita road to China through the Hukawng Valley in Burma and the other through Manipur and Cachar in the south-east or south of Assam.

gave the physician a gold-laced shirt and a necklace of gold (Singh, *Historical and Cultural Relations* 43).

Vaiṣṇavism, performance traditions, and shared aesthetics

The spread of Vaiṣṇavism in Manipur predates Garib Niwas but was significantly consolidated under his reign. Scholars note that Garib Niwas procured copies of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* from Assam and promoted its dissemination in Manipur (Bhuyan, *Swargadew Rājeswar* 55). This textual exchange had profound implications for Manipuri music, dance, and performance traditions.

Several scholars have observed affinities between Assamese *Ankiyā-nāt* and Manipuri *Rāslīlā*. Nilakanta Singh argues that Bhagyachandra may have been influenced by dance forms prevalent in the *satras* during his exposure to Assamese court culture (Singh, *Aspects of Indian Culture* 71). Nilakanta Singh further observes: “The *ankiya-nats*, as prescribed in various *sattras*, have got sequences like *sūtradhārī nāca*, *kṛṣṇa praveśara nāca*, *gopī praveśara nāca*, etc. Manipuri *Rāslīlā* normally has the following sequence, viz. *sutradhari*, *krishna abhisar*, *gopi abhisar*, *bhangi pareng achouba*, *krishna nartan*, and of course the play. *Chali* is a basic movement in *Rāslīlā*. There is no doubt that there is much affinity in the patterns of Assamese *Ankiya-nat* and Manipuri *Rāslīlā*, even though the theme and dance movements must have grown out of the traditional movement in the respective areas (Singh, *Fragments of Manipuri Culture* 14). Kaila Vatsyayan observes: “The costume of the *Rāsa* dances is unique and has no parallels, except for some resemblance with costumes worn by the dancers of Assam”(61). Structural similarities in narrative sequencing, the role of the *Sutradhāra*, and musical renderings further support this claim (Singh, *Fragments of Manipuri Culture* 14; Datta, *Historical and Cultural*).

The *Wari-leeba* tradition of Manipur, involving the narration of the *Daśama-skandha* of the *Bhāgavata*³, provides another compelling link. Dr. Birendranath Datta further draws attention, on the authority of the Manipuri Puranic Parishad papers, to the *Wari-leeba* tradition of Manipur, which was introduced in Manipur by an Assamese Brahmin. According to the account, in the palace of Swargadew Rajeswar Singha, Manipuri king Bhagyachandra came across a learned Brahmin called Jiu Ram Sharma, who was brought to his palace at Manipur by Bhagyachandra himself. In 1776, the 15th lunar day of the month of Hiyangei, Monday, Jiu Ram Sharma began to narrate for the first time the *Daśama-skandha* of the *Bhāgavata*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* stories were also narrated by him, and since Jiu Ram came from Tekhāo, he came to be known as Tekhāo Bāman Leeba (Datta, *Historical and Cultural*). Datta also observes similarity between Manipuri raga rendering and the *rāga*

³ The Manipuri chronicle *Takhel Ngamba* and *Ningthourol Lambuba* records the invasion of the Tripurians and the Burmese invasion. According to their version, the invasion was because of a grievance by the Tripurians regarding the *Bhagavata* (Singh Jhalajit, 32). The two chronicles are silent about the grievance. However, late Moirangthem Chandra Singh explains that the Tripurians procured a copy of the *Bhagavata* from Assam and while they were proceeding home with it, the Manipurians attacked them and got it. It was to avenge this loss that the Tripurians invaded Manipur in 1723, though the Tripurians had to suffer loss instead. See Singh Jhalajit 33.

rendering in *sātrīyā* music. Datta further observes: “the gamaka of Manipuri music is akin to that of the *Ojā-pāli* music that a discerning listener cannot but be struck by the similarity” (*Historical and Cultural*). Nilakanta Singh observes that in the *Ojā-pāli* system, and also sometimes in the *sātrīyā* system, the *rāga* rendering is done with the help of such syllables as *hā, ri, tā, nā*, whereas in Manipuri, the *rāga* rendering of these syllables is *tā, ri, tā, nā* (Datta, *Historical and Cultural*). *Tekhāohaobā* or beginning in the Assamese style in singing and *tālas* like *tekhāo rūpak* and *tekhāo chārītal* in the Manipuri music system unmistakably point to Assamese connections (Datta, *Historical and Cultural*). Kapila Vatsyayan also opines, “Obviously even prior to the royal proclamation and decision of presenting the *Rāsa* dances, a style of dance must have been prevalent in Manipur which had perhaps some connections with the *Ojā-pālis* of Assam” (61).

Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir and the question of identity

Within this broader historical and cultural framework, the Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir assumes particular significance. In the context of Srimanta Sankaradeva’s influence in the Manipuri soils, perhaps the most startling fact has been revealed by Professor. E. Nilakanta Singh. He states that Sankaradeva of Assam is worshiped as an ancestor in the *Lai-haraoba* festival of Manipur. To quote him: “The Lai-Haraoba festival (meaning, literally the merrymaking of the gods and the goddesses) dedicated to sylvan and ancestral deities (numbering more than 300 and including Shankar Dev of Assam) represents a combination of spirit, god and ancestor worship” (Singh, *Manipuri Dances* 51). The *Lai Haraoba* is a festival that reflects the culture of the Meitei in its entirety. It is associated with ancestor-worship, village deities numbering more than 300, with Manipuri priests and priestesses being the directors and star performers.

The designation *Ebodhou* aligns with Nilakanta Singh’s observation that Śankaradeva is worshipped as an ancestral figure in certain contexts of the *Lai-Haraoba* festival (Singh, *Manipuri Dances* 51). Eminent Manipuri historian Professor Rajkumar Jhalajit Singh, who was a disciple of Surya Kumar Bhuyan at Cotton College, informed this author that this ‘Shangkardev temple’ was surely connected with the saint Sankaradeva of Assam.



According to him, it came to be there either by means of royal alliances between the lines of Manipuri kings and the Ahom kings, or some emissaries of Assam Vaishnavism must have reached the distant place of Manipur for the propagation of Sankaradeva's Faith, which assumed a local colour in the course of time. Prof. Jhalajit Singh also postulates that the temple in reference might have also been established in the distant past by some Ahom soldiers who were deputed at various times to help the Manipuri kings during their battle with the king of Pung or Burma.

Thus, the opinion of Manipuri historians and the ancestral framing, highlighted by Nilakanta Singh, distinguishes the shrine from Śaiva temples and supports its association with Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva rather than with Śiva. The absence of *līṅga* worship, the ascetic iconography, distinctive ritual practices, and the *Sankarī*-style headgear collectively reinforce this identification. While the temple does not conform strictly to *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* ritual norms, it bears witness to a process of localization and transformation through which Assamese Vaiṣṇava ideas were adapted within Manipuri cultural matrices. If the statement of Nilakanta Singh has a basis, the historians and anthropologists may look into the rituals of Lai-Haraoba festival for greater details.

Another plausible hypothesis is that the shrine commemorates Jiu Ram Sharma, later known as Tekhao Baman Leeba, who may have been a devoted follower of Śaṅkaradeva's teachings. Over time, the original *nāmghara* may have been absorbed into local religious frameworks, acquiring new meanings while retaining vestiges of its Assamese origins. It is possible that Jiu Ram Sharma established a *nāmghar* in Yumnam Huidrom village, expounded *Bhāgavata* there, and after his departure, he himself got deified.

Conclusion

The Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir of Manipur represents a compelling yet understudied testament to the historical diffusion of *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma--dharma* beyond Assam. While definitive conclusions regarding its origin remain elusive, architectural, ritual, iconographic, and historical evidence strongly suggest its association with the Śaṅkaradeva tradition. The temple stands as a material trace of cultural migration, adaptation, and memory, shaped by centuries of Assam-Manipur interaction.

This study underscores the need to view Northeast Indian religious histories not as isolated developments but as interconnected processes shaped by mobility, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. Further interdisciplinary research- combining archival study, ethnography, and comparative religion- may yield deeper insights into the layered histories embodied in sites such as the Ebodhou Shangkardev Mandir.

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***Nāma-dharma* and the Autochthones of Assam: A Changing Milieu**

- Dr. Trikha Rani Das*

Abstract

Assam has historically been a region of ethnic plurality, marked by the presence of numerous autochthonous communities with distinct religious beliefs and socio-cultural practices. Prior to the fifteenth century, these groups largely followed animistic traditions, fertility cults, and syncretic religious forms influenced by Śākti worship, Śaivism, and Tantric Buddhism. The advent of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and the emergence of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma* brought a transformative religious and social ideology that sought to transcend caste hierarchies and unify society through devotion (*bhakti*). This paper examines the relationship between *nāma-dharma* and the autochthones of Assam, tracing its evolution from the time of Śaṅkaradeva to the post-Śaṅkaradeva period. It critically analyses the processes of integration, accommodation, Sanskritization, and marginalization experienced by various ethnic communities in their interaction with *nāma-dharma* and the *satra* institution. By engaging with historical and sociological perspectives, the study highlights the contradictions between the egalitarian spiritual ideals of *nāma-dharma* and the later institutional practices that reinforced caste distinctions. The paper argues that while *nāma-dharma* has played a crucial role in shaping Assamese identity and fostering social cohesion, its relationship with the autochthones has remained complex, marked by both inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: *Nāma-dharma*, autochthones, Assam, Śaṅkaradeva, *satra*, social change.

Introduction

The term *autochthones* literally mean the earliest known inhabitants or ethnic groups of a region. Assam is the land of numerous groups of autochthones such as the Misings, Kacharis, Chutiyas, Morans, Kaivartas, and others. All these communities maintained their own traditional religious beliefs and practices, largely shaped by animistic traditions. Before the advent of Śaṅkaradeva, Assam had been a strong centre of Śākti worship alongside widespread animistic practices. During this period, tribal fertility cults were often interwoven with Buddhist Tantricism. From early times, Assam functioned as an important centre of Śiva and Śākti worship. Debased forms of Buddhism (often described as crypto-Buddhism) also influenced society, traces of which are still found in remote regions of Assam. Practices such as *gopīdhārā*, *bār-sevā*, and *rāti-khowā* continue to survive. Many castes and communities maintain distinct creeds and faiths, varying widely from tribe to tribe.

At this juncture, in the fifteenth century A.D., Assam witnessed the emergence of new religious ideas rooted in the liberal doctrine of *bhakti*. The rise of Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva

and the faith he propagated, known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*, fundamentally altered Assamese society. Through *nāma-dharma*, people encountered a new ethical framework, cultural life, and religious worldview. In his translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śaṅkaradeva enumerates the tribes inhabiting Assam: *kirāṭa kachāri khācī gāro miri yavana kaṅka gowāla asama maluka dhobā ye turuka kubāca mleccha caṅḍāla* (*Bhāgavata* 2.53).

Methodological framework

The present study examines the relationship between *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma* and the autochthonous communities of Assam, focusing on the processes through which Vaiṣṇavism was accepted and adapted by various ethnic groups. It also analyses the interaction between the *satra* institution and *nāma-dharma* in the post-Śaṅkaradeva period, highlighting patterns of continuity, accommodation, and transformation. Methodologically, the paper is based entirely on secondary sources, including scholarly books, research journals, and relevant academic web-based materials. An analytical approach is employed to interpret the data and critically assess the socio-religious dynamics underlying the spread and institutionalization of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam.

Relation with autochthones during the time of Śaṅkaradeva

Śaṅkaradeva, in his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, explains that all living beings are creations of the Supreme Being: *sakala praṇīka dekhibeke ātmasama upāya madhyata iṭo āti mukhyatama*—that is, one should see all beings as equal manifestations of the self, which constitutes the highest path to liberation (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 1825). He further states that the souls of animals such as dogs and jackals are as dear to the Supreme Being as those of human beings (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 121).

Śaṅkaradeva also rejected caste-based distinctions: *kṛṣṇara kathāta yīṭo rasika brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāgoi kika; smaroka mātra hari dine rāti nabācoi bhakati jāti-ajāt*—meaning, that “One who delights in Kṛṣṇa’s Name does not need Brahmin birth, for *bhakti* does not distinguish between caste and outcaste” (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā* verse 129). He envisioned a society in which people of all castes and communities would pray together and share food. Bhattadeva similarly praised Śaṅkaradeva’s role in promoting social cohesion, noting that *nāma-dharma* elevated the socially marginalized and enabled liberation from rebirth. The *nāma-ghara* emerged as a democratic institution granting equal participation to all devotees regardless of caste or creed, while the *satra* developed later, possibly after Śaṅkaradeva’s demise, has exercised tremendous impact on the Assamese socio-cultural life.

Relation of *Nāma-dharma* with ethnic groups in post-Śaṅkaradeva times

In the post-Śaṅkaradeva period, the relationship between *nāma-dharma* and ethnic communities became increasingly complex, particularly through the *satra* institutions. The fragmentation of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma* into *saṅghatis* led to the gradual re-entry of Brahmanical caste hierarchies and notions of untouchability (Nath). Initially, the Ahom *Svargadeos* viewed Neo-Vaiṣṇavism as a process of detribalization and did not patronize it extensively. Over time, however, royal patronage—especially towards the *Brahma-saṅghati*—reinforced caste distinctions. Royal decrees affirmed Brahmanical superiority and

criminalized caste transgressions, contributing to social unrest, including phases of the Moāmariyā rebellion led by Kaivarta forces.

Satra-led proselytization of tribal communities involved conditional inclusion, requiring the abandonment of indigenous practices such as pork consumption and liquor use. As observed by the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon in 1891, conversion often stemmed from social marginalization and the desire for mobility. Converted individuals were monitored to ensure conformity to Hindu norms.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, movements for social recognition among communities such as the Kaivartas, Suts (*Bariyas*), and Nātha Yogis reveal the ambivalent role of *satras*. While some Satrādhikārs imposed restrictive conditions, others- most notably Śrī Pitāmbardeva Gosvāmi of Garmur Satra- supported anti-caste initiatives (Nath) despite strong opposition.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha and tribal communities

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha, established in 1930 at Nagaon, aimed to propagate the teachings of Śaṅkaradeva and strengthen the core principles of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. Emerging amid colonial modernity and reformist impulses, the Saṅgha sought to preserve devotional ethics, cultural cohesion, and spiritual equality. Through *nāmghar*-centred worship, congregational prayer, Assamese language usage, and community performance such as *bhāona*, the Saṅgha has sought to foster inclusive religious spaces.

Nevertheless, its engagement with tribal communities has to be on individual basis rather than as a community, for some groups such as the Bodo-Kacharis, Misings, Karbis, Rabhas, Tiwas and Deoris, as a community, have retained indigenous religious practices, indicating that while Neo-Vaiṣṇavism facilitates ethical reform and cultural exchange, it is unable to fully replace indigenous traditions. However, it is to be mentioned that the Saṅgha's presence has at least resisted the resurgence of post-Śaṅkaradeva Brahmanism.

Conclusion

The relationship between *nāma-dharma* and the autochthonous communities of Assam may be viewed as historically constructive yet critically evolving. Under Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, *nāma-dharma* articulated a spiritually egalitarian vision that challenged rigid hierarchies and created shared devotional spaces- an ideal upheld in principle by institutions such as the Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha. While the lived realization of this inclusivity remains incomplete, *nāma-dharma* provided an ethical and cultural framework for dialogue, participation, and partial integration. Its enduring legacy lies in its capacity to inspire ongoing reflection and reform while inviting critical scrutiny of the limits and conditions of social inclusiveness.

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RULES FOR INDIAN WORDS

1. Pan Indian Transliteration Scripts should be adopted invariably. (see section 16).
2. Transliteration of Assamese ড and ঢ may be ignored. They may be spelled as d and dh as it is done for Assamese ড and ঢ. (Use of d, and dh for Assamese ড and ঢ is also found).
3. Assamese ব and Sanskrit व should always be v. (Except in Suggestion 14).
4. Assamese ব should be v if the letter originates from Sanskrit व. It may be b if it is of a word from a language other than Sanskrit or if the original Sanskrit word has व in its spelling.
5. Transliteration of Assamese character for suprasegmental sound োঁ (used to mark the nasalization in a vowel) is to be avoided.
6. Assamese য and ঞ should be y and Assamese জ should be j.
7. ঞ is to be used for Assamese ঞ and ঞ for Assamese consonant clusters with Assamese ঞ.
8. Diacritic marks should be invariably used in old Indian words and they are to be written in italics except in few cases mentioned in sections 9 and 10.
9. The Indian words which are already accepted in the English vocabulary and Indian words where English prefixes and suffixes are used are to be considered as English. For example, Veda, Vedic, Vaiṣṇava, Vaiṣṇavism, Vaiṣṇavite etc. are written in diacritic marks without italicizing them.
10. Pan Indian proper nouns (person names and place names) are to be written in diacritic marks but they are not italicized.
11. Names of books are always to be written in italics with initial capital letter of each head-word (except suggestion 12). They may be either Indian or English, old or modern.
12. Names of articles (research paper etc.) are not italicized. They are put within inverted commas and with each headword capitalized.
13. Pan Indian proper nouns other than person names and place names are to be written in italics and with initial capital letter. But when such proper nouns are used as common nouns, they are not spelled with initial capital letter, they are italicized.
14. It is observed that many Indian writers have a tendency to capitalize the initial letter of any Indian words. We should not forget that Indian words also should follow the rules of English punctuation as they are used in English sentences, that is, common nouns should never be capitalized.
15. These suggestions are not considered applicable for modern Assamese words.

Vowels and semi vowels

Assamese	Devanāgarī	Roman		Assamese	Devanāgarī	Roman
অ	अ	a		ঝ	ऋ	r
আ	आ	ā		এ	ए	e
ই	इ	i		ঐ	ऐ	ai
ঐ	ई	ī		ও	ओ	o
উ	उ	u		ঔ	औ	au
ঊ	ऊ	ū				

Consonants

Assamese	Devanāgarī	Roman		Assamese	Devanāgarī	Roman
ক	क	k		প	प	p
খ	ख	kh		ফ	फ	ph
গ	ग	g		ব	ब	b
ঘ	घ	gh		ভ	भ	bh
ঙ	ङ	ṅ		ম	म	m
চ	च	c		য, ঞ	य	y
ছ	छ	ch		ৰ	र	r
জ	ज	j		ল	ल	l
ঝ	झ	jh		ৱ	व	v
ঞ	ञ	ñ		শ	श	ś
ট	ट	t		ষ	ष	ṣ
ঠ	ठ	ṭh		স	स	s
ড	ड	d		হ	ह	h
ঢ	ढ	ḍh		ক্ষ	-	kṣ
ণ	ण	ṇ		ড	-	ḍ
ত	त	t		ঢ	-	ḍh
থ	थ	th		ৎ	-	t
দ	द	d		ং	.	ṅ, ṁ
ধ	ध	dh		ঃ	ः	ḥ
ন	न	n		ঁ		

