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Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva as a Social Reformer: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Relevance to Assamese Society

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Abstract

Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568) occupies a foundational position in the social, religious, literary and cultural history of Assam. Although traditionally remembered as a saint and religious preceptor, his historical significance extends considerably beyond the domain of theology. This paper examines Sankaradeva as a social reformer and evaluates the contemporary relevance of his ideas for Assamese society. Drawing upon historical, textual and interpretive sources, the study argues that Sankaradeva's reform programme represented an important attempt to reorganise a fragmented medieval society through accessible devotion, ethical conduct, vernacular communication, collective worship and community-based institutions. His Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma challenged ritual exclusivity and attempted to make religious participation accessible beyond established social boundaries, while the Namghar and Sattra provided institutional spaces for collective participation, cultural education and social interaction [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966]. His use of Assamese as a vehicle of religious and literary communication, together with Kirtana-Ghosha, Borgeet, Ankiya Naat and Bhaona, transformed religious communication into a wider programme of cultural democratisation. Recent scholarship similarly identifies Namghars, Sattras and performative culture as instruments of social integration and community formation [Pathak & Palit, 2023]. At the same time, the paper avoids presenting Sankaradeva as a modern egalitarian in an anachronistic sense. The later institutionalisation of the movement generated hierarchies and gender limitations that complicate its egalitarian legacy. The paper concludes that Sankaradeva remains relevant not because medieval institutions can simply be reproduced today, but because his principles of social cohesion, ethical citizenship, cultural pluralism, vernacular education, non-violence, community participation and human dignity can be critically reinterpreted for contemporary Assam.

Keywords: Srimanta Sankaradeva, Social Reform, Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma, Neo-Vaishnavism, Namghar, Sattra, Assamese Society, Social Equality, Cultural Integration, Social Harmony, Assam.

1. Introduction

The history of Assam cannot be adequately understood without understanding the extraordinary intellectual and social intervention of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Born in 1449 and passing away in 1568, Sankaradeva lived at a period when the Brahmaputra valley was characterised by considerable political plurality, ethnic diversity, religious competition and cultural interaction. The region was not a homogeneous social formation. Different tribal, non-tribal, indigenous and migrant communities participated in complex processes of accommodation, conflict and cultural exchange, while religious practices included Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Tantric traditions, local cults and other forms of belief [Neog, 1965; Barua, 1960]. The political landscape was similarly fragmented among the Ahoms, Koches, Baro-Bhuyans and other regional powers. Recent historical scholarship places Sankaradeva's movement precisely within this context of political contestation and religious plurality rather than treating it as an isolated religious phenomenon [Pathak & Palit, 2023]. Granthaalayah Publication

Sankaradeva's importance therefore lies not merely in the propagation of a religious doctrine but in the construction of a new social imagination. His Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma provided an accessible form of devotion centred on surrender to Krishna and practices of *sravana* and *kirtana*. More significantly from a social-historical perspective, he developed institutional and cultural mechanisms through which these ideas could become part of everyday community life. Namghar, Sattra, congregational worship, literary production, music, theatre and dance collectively created a network through which religious, cultural and social communication could occur [Sarma, 1966; Neog, 1965].

The social reform significance of Sankaradeva should consequently be understood through three interconnected

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processes. First, he sought to make religious knowledge and devotion accessible through the vernacular rather than restricting them to Sanskritic specialists. Second, he established collective institutions that enabled people to participate in shared religious and cultural practices. Third, he used literature, music, drama and performance to communicate ethical and philosophical ideas to ordinary people. The resulting movement gradually became one of the most influential forces in the formation of Assamese cultural identity [Barua, 1960; Sarma, 1966; Neog, 1965].

Yet, describing Sankaradeva simply as a champion of modern equality would be historically problematic. The egalitarianism of the movement was primarily located in the spiritual and devotional sphere. Later Sattras developed differentiated institutional structures, and gender participation was not always equivalent to institutional authority. Contemporary studies have specifically identified the continuing marginality of women in some Sattric governance structures [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate The historical task, therefore, is neither to deify Sankaradeva nor to reduce him to the limitations of his age. Rather, it is to understand the transformative possibilities and historical limitations of his reform programme.

This paper accordingly asks a central question: What made Sankaradeva a social reformer, and which elements of his social philosophy remain relevant to contemporary Assamese society? The paper argues that his enduring significance lies in a model of social transformation based on ethical community, accessible knowledge, cultural participation, social dialogue, non-violence and the recognition of human dignity.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on Sankaradeva is extensive and multidisciplinary, encompassing history, philosophy, Assamese literature, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, cultural studies and political thought. The scholarship may broadly be divided into biographical, theological, literary-cultural, institutional, socio-historical and contemporary relevance-oriented approaches.

Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Sankaradev: Vaishnava Saint of Assam* remains one of the important early English-language attempts to introduce Sankaradeva's personality, religious ideas and cultural contributions to a wider readership [Barua, 1960]. Barua's interpretation presents Sankaradeva as a multifaceted personality whose influence extended through preaching, literature, music, dance, drama, Namghars and Sattras. The work is particularly useful because it places Sankaradeva within the broader cultural history of Assam rather than treating him exclusively as a theological figure. Assam Academy for Cultural Relations

Maheswar Neog's *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam* constitutes one of the foundational historical studies of the Sankaradeva movement. First published in 1965, the work was based on Neog's doctoral research and systematically examined the historical development of Vaishnavism in Assam, the sources relating to Sankaradeva and the emergence of the institutional tradition [Neog, 1965]. The importance of Neog's study lies in its attempt to reconstruct the historical environment in which Sankaradeva's movement developed rather than reading the saint solely through later devotional narratives. Google Books

S. N. Sarma's study of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the Sattra institution represents another foundational contribution to the historical understanding of the movement [Sarma, 1966]. Sarma's approach is important for understanding how the movement developed institutional structures and how Sattras became central to Assamese religious and cultural life. The original study emerged from doctoral research undertaken in the 1950s and examined a wide range of primary and secondary materials [Sarma, 1966]. OCR Digital File

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's writings on Sankaradeva contributed to the cultural and literary construction of the saint's modern Assamese image. Bezbaroa interpreted Sankaradeva through the lens of Assamese cultural regeneration and the ethical significance of his religious philosophy [Bezbaroa, n.d.]. Nabin Chandra Sarma's work on Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva further developed the biographical and philosophical dimensions of Sankaradeva studies [Sarma, n.d.]. The scholarly traditions represented by Neog, Sarma, Barua, Bezbaroa and Nabin Chandra Sarma collectively established the intellectual foundation upon which subsequent studies of Sankaradeva have developed.

Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami's writings and edited works expanded discussion of Sankaradeva's religious, literary and cultural significance, while Bimal Mazumdar's bibliographical and analytical contributions helped consolidate the expanding field of Sankaradeva studies [Dev Goswami, n.d.; Mazumdar, n.d.]. Hiren Gohain's discussion of the *Mahapurushiya* tradition in Assamese national life is particularly important for understanding the relationship between Vaishnavite values and Assamese collective identity [Gohain, 2014]. The question of identity is crucial because the Sankaradeva movement was not merely a religious organisation; it participated in processes of cultural synthesis across communities.

Bapchandra Mahanta's work on Bhagavata religion and Sankaradeva's philosophy examines the intellectual foundations of Eka-Sarana devotion and helps explain the relationship between philosophical doctrine and social practice [Mahanta, n.d.]. Yogiraj Bose's discussions of Vedanta and Vaishnavism similarly contribute to understanding the philosophical background from which Sankaradeva's religious vision emerged [Bose, n.d.]. Nilima Sharma's work on Sankaradeva's philosophy provides another philosophical interpretation, while Upendra Nath Goswami's studies of Vaishnava devotional traditions locate Sankaradeva within the wider intellectual history of Indian Bhakti [Sharma, n.d.; Goswami, n.d.].

Dimbeswar Neog's work on Sankaradeva as a cultural and historical leader is important because it moves discussion from religious biography towards historical agency [Neog, n.d.]. Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa's *Sankaradeva, His Life, Preachings, and Practices* offers an extensive historical biography and attempts to reconstruct Sankaradeva's life, preaching, travels, discipleship and institutional influence [Rajkhowa, 2003]. The work, extending to more than 400 pages, illustrates the breadth of biographical scholarship surrounding Sankaradeva. Google Books

Recent scholarship has increasingly moved away from viewing Neo-Vaishnavism merely as a religious movement. Pathak and Palit argue that the movement should be examined as a major socio-cultural transformation involving religion, politics, language, arts, social conventions and identity formation [Pathak & Palit, 2023]. Their study explicitly investigates the Namghar, Sattra and Bhaona as institutional mechanisms and discusses caste, gender and ritual practices alongside literary culture. Granthaalayah Publication

B. Vijayakumar interprets Neo-Vaishnavism as a socio-

cultural revolution and emphasises the role of Sattras in the development of Assamese arts and literature [Vijayakumar, 2023]. The study stresses the assimilative role of the tradition in bringing diverse indigenous and non-indigenous cultural elements into interaction. Shanlax Journals

Baburam Saikia's study of Sattra culture provides an important anthropological perspective by examining the transformation of Sattra institutions and the power relations surrounding them. Importantly, Saikia does not assume that all Sattras represent a single unchanging tradition; rather, the study identifies theological segmentation, variation in ritual practices and changing relationships between Sattras and local communities [Saikia, 2018]. Utlib OJS

Dhurjjati Sarma's study of the performative world of Sankari Vaishnavism highlights the plural cultural environment from which Assamese literary culture developed. The study challenges simplistic understandings of Assamese culture as monocultural and argues that Sankari Vaishnavism appropriated and transformed multilingual and multicultural elements within early modern Assam [Sarma, 2023]. ResearchGate

Shyamal Borah's examination of Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in recent times focuses on the contemporary relevance of the tradition. His discussion highlights the role of Namghar and Sattra in shaping Assamese social life while also drawing attention to the changing position of women within contemporary Sattric institutions [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate

Studies of Borgeet have introduced another dimension to the social-reform debate. Sharma and Hatikakoty argue that the egalitarian ethos of Sankardeva's devotional compositions was not merely theological but also helped create communities around collective singing and devotional performance [Sharma & Hatikakoty, 2025]. Delhi University Publishing

Recent historical-sociological research has also examined the movement's relationship with caste. Ahmed argues that Eka-Sarana Dharma challenged caste-based exclusion and created spaces through Sattras and Namghars for communities that had been situated differently within existing social hierarchies [Ahmed, 2022]. At the same time, the study acknowledges later sectarian differentiation and tensions between egalitarian ideals and institutional practice. IJNRD

Recent research has also examined Sankardeva through political theory. Borah and Taid interpret his movement as a process of community reorganisation in which religious institutions, cultural practices and devotional equality generated new spaces of collective participation [Borah & Taid, 2025]. IJI Studies

Gunada Nath's recent study approaches Sankardeva as an architect of social transformation and employs qualitative content analysis to examine equality, inclusion, community participation, collective worship, vernacular communication and cultural performance [Nath, 2026]. The study is particularly relevant because it explicitly connects institutional construction and cultural performance with social transformation. MRR Journal

Kandarpa Nath's recent work similarly examines Sankardeva's philosophy in relation to peace, harmony and social equality in contemporary society [Nath, 2026]. Granthaalayah Publication

Other contemporary studies have examined Sankardeva's impact upon particular communities, including the Tiwas, and have emphasised the role of Eka-Sarana principles in establishing social interaction beyond narrow caste and ethnic boundaries [SunText, 2025]. SunText

Research on gender has generated a more complicated picture. Some studies emphasise women's participation in devotional and cultural activities, whereas others point to institutional restrictions and limited representation within formal Sattric authority [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate This scholarship is particularly important because it prevents contemporary researchers from converting Sankardeva into a completely modern egalitarian figure.

The literature therefore reveals several broad approaches: Sankardeva as religious reformer [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966], as cultural architect [Barua, 1960], as literary innovator [Dev Goswami, n.d.], as institution-builder [Sarma, 1966], as agent of social integration [Pathak & Palit, 2023], as a figure of Assamese identity [Gohain, 2014], as a political and social organiser [Borah & Taid, 2025], and as a continuing source of ethical and cultural relevance [Nath, 2026]. The major limitation in existing scholarship is that these dimensions are frequently examined separately. A more integrated historical framework connecting Sankaradeva's reform principles with contemporary problems of Assamese society remains necessary.

3. Research Gap

Despite the enormous literature on Sankaradeva, an important research gap remains. Much of the traditional literature is either hagiographical, theological or cultural-nationalist in orientation, while a significant part of modern scholarship concentrates on individual dimensions such as literature, philosophy, Sattras, Namghars or performing arts. More recent studies have begun to investigate social transformation, caste, gender and political dimensions, but the relationship between Sankaradeva's historical reform principles and the concrete challenges of twenty-first-century Assamese society remains comparatively underdeveloped [Pathak & Palit, 2023; Borah & Taid, 2025].

A second gap concerns the danger of romanticising Sankardeva. It is common to describe him as an advocate of equality without distinguishing between spiritual equality, institutional equality and modern democratic equality. The distinction is historically essential. Sankardeva's movement opened devotional participation to groups excluded or marginalised by established structures, but the later institutional order was not free from hierarchy. Likewise, women's participation expanded in important ways, but full gender equality cannot simply be attributed to the medieval movement [Borah, 2022; Saikia, 2018].

A third gap concerns contemporary application. Existing studies often conclude that Sankardeva remains relevant to peace, harmony and Assamese culture, but they do not sufficiently translate these principles into contemporary issues such as ethnic tension, communal polarisation, gender inequality, cultural homogenisation, youth alienation, environmental degradation, weakening community institutions, misinformation and the growing distance between public morality and private behaviour.

The present paper addresses these gaps by treating Sankardeva's social reform as a historically situated project and then critically identifying those principles that can be adapted—not mechanically reproduced—for present-day Assamese society.

4. Objectives of the Study

The principal objectives of the study are to examine Sankaradeva as a social reformer in the historical context of

medieval Assam; to analyse the social philosophy underlying Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma; to examine the social functions of Namghar and Sattra; to assess his contribution to vernacular education and cultural democratisation; to critically examine his ideas concerning equality, caste, gender, community and ethical conduct; and to evaluate the contemporary relevance of these principles for Assamese society.

5. Methodology

The study follows a qualitative historical and interpretive methodology. It is primarily based on secondary historical literature, biographies, philosophical studies, literary scholarship, research on Neo-Vaishnavism and contemporary academic studies of Namghar and Sattra institutions. Major works of Maheswar Neog, S. N. Sarma, Birinchi Kumar Barua, Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa, Hiren Gohain and other scholars are used alongside recent peer-reviewed studies [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966; Barua, 1960; Rajkhowa, 2003; Gohain, 2014]. Primary textual traditions associated with Sankaradeva, particularly *Kirtana-Ghosha*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiya Naat* and his rendering of portions of the *Bhagavata*, are interpreted as intellectual and cultural evidence rather than merely religious texts.

The analysis adopts a historical-hermeneutic approach. It first reconstructs the socio-religious context of Sankardeva's time, then identifies the reform principles embedded in his teachings and institutions, and finally evaluates their relevance in the context of contemporary Assam. Particular attention is given to the distinction between Sankardeva's original reformist impulse and the later institutional development of the movement. Such distinction is necessary because traditions change as they become institutionalised [Saikia, 2018].

6. Sankaradeva and the Historical Context of Medieval Assam

Sankaradeva emerged in an Assam characterised by plurality rather than uniformity. Religious life included various forms of Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Tantric practices, local and tribal religious traditions and Brahmanical ritualism. Political power was distributed among different kingdoms and local authorities, and the social landscape consisted of numerous ethnic and occupational groups [Neog, 1965]. The Brahmaputra valley was consequently a space of cultural interaction where identity was continuously negotiated.

The significance of Sankardeva's intervention lies partly in the fact that he did not attempt to create social unity by eliminating diversity. Instead, he created a common cultural and devotional vocabulary. His movement provided a form of participation through which different communities could enter into a shared religious-cultural environment. Recent historical research similarly identifies Neo-Vaishnavism as a major mechanism of social integration in medieval Assam [Pathak & Palit, 2023]. Granthaalayah Publication

This is important because social reform in pre-modern Assam could not be based on modern constitutional institutions. Reform had to operate through available cultural structures. Sankardeva therefore used religion, literature, music, theatre and collective worship as instruments of social transformation. His achievement was not that he separated religion from society; rather, he transformed religious culture into an instrument of social organisation.

7. Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma as a Social Philosophy

The central philosophical principle of Sankardeva's movement was *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, commonly understood as exclusive surrender to the one supreme divine principle, expressed through devotion, listening and chanting [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966]. Its social significance was greater than its doctrinal simplicity suggests.

The accessibility of the movement was fundamental. Religious participation did not necessarily depend upon elaborate sacrificial rituals or mastery of Sanskrit. Devotion could be expressed through listening to sacred narratives, singing, remembering the divine name and participating in congregational worship. This made religion more accessible to ordinary people [Sarma, 1966]. Contemporary scholarship similarly describes Eka-Sarana as a tradition that reduced dependence on elaborate ritualism and emphasised *sravana* and *kirtana* [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate

This was socially significant because knowledge is itself a form of power. When religious knowledge is concentrated among a small group, social authority becomes concentrated as well. By communicating religious ideas through Assamese language and collective performance, Sankardeva weakened the monopoly of specialised religious communication. His reform can therefore be interpreted as a form of vernacular democratisation of religious knowledge.

8. Opposition to Ritual Exclusivity and Social Hierarchy

One of Sankardeva's major reformist contributions was his criticism of excessive ritualism and his emphasis on devotion and ethical conduct. The historical significance of this intervention should not be overstated as an absolute rejection of all hierarchy, but it nevertheless represented an important challenge to the social authority associated with ritual exclusivity [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966].

The movement attracted followers from diverse communities. Historical and contemporary studies refer to the participation of people belonging to different ethnic and social backgrounds, demonstrating that the movement created possibilities for interaction across existing social boundaries [Pathak & Palit, 2023; Ahmed, 2022]. IJNRD

Sankardeva's contribution is therefore better described as spiritual egalitarianism with significant social consequences rather than modern democratic egalitarianism. This distinction is important. He did not formulate equality in the language of constitutional rights, citizenship or individual liberty. Yet, by affirming the spiritual value of devotion irrespective of inherited social status, he created an ideological space within which existing distinctions could be questioned.

9. Namghar as an Institution of Community Democracy

Perhaps Sankardeva's most enduring social innovation was the Namghar. The Namghar was not simply a prayer hall. In Assamese society it became a community space where religious activity, social interaction, cultural performance, collective decision-making and community organisation could intersect [Sarma, 1966; Barua, 1960].

This multifunctionality makes the Namghar particularly important from the perspective of social history. It provided an institutional mechanism through which villagers could participate in collective life. The institution therefore represented a form of decentralised social organisation appropriate to the conditions of rural Assam.

The modern relevance of the Namghar lies precisely in this community-centred character. At a time when urbanisation, individualisation and digital communication are weakening face-to-face social interaction, community institutions capable of creating dialogue and collective responsibility have

renewed importance. Recent research continues to identify collective worship and community participation as central dimensions of Sankardeva's institutional legacy [Nath, 2026]. MRR Journal

The Namghar should not, however, be romanticised. Not every contemporary Namghar necessarily functions as an inclusive democratic institution. Social power, class, gender and local political relationships can influence community institutions. Its contemporary relevance therefore depends upon whether the Namghar can recover the participatory spirit of community rather than merely reproduce ritual routine.

10. Sattra and the Institutionalisation of Social Reform

The Sattra represented another major institutional innovation associated with Sankardeva and his successors. Sattras became centres of religious education, manuscript preservation, artistic practice, music, dance, theatre and spiritual training [Sarma, 1966]. They played a major role in transmitting Sankari culture across generations.

However, the history of the Sattra also demonstrates an important principle of social history: institutions change the ideas that create them. Saikia's anthropological study shows that Sattras developed different theological orientations, ritual practices and relationships with surrounding communities [Saikia, 2018]. Utlib OJS

The early reformist emphasis on accessibility could therefore become partially transformed through institutionalisation. Authority became concentrated in specific institutional roles. This does not invalidate Sankardeva's reformism; rather, it demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining egalitarian ideals within durable institutions.

For contemporary Assam, this historical experience offers an important lesson. Social reform cannot depend solely upon creating institutions. Institutions must continually renew their accountability, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

11. Language and the Democratisation of Knowledge

Sankaradeva's use of Assamese represents one of the most important dimensions of his social reform. He transformed religious and philosophical communication into forms accessible to people who did not necessarily possess Sanskritic learning [Neog, 1965; Barua, 1960].

The significance of this intervention extends beyond literature. Language creates social belonging. A common literary language allows diverse communities to imagine themselves as members of a broader cultural community. Sankardeva's writings, along with the contributions of Madhavdeva and subsequent Vaishnavite writers, therefore contributed to the consolidation of Assamese literary culture [Barua, 1960; Neog, 1965].

Contemporary Assam faces a different but related problem: language anxiety, declining reading habits, digital homogenisation and pressures from dominant global and Indian languages. Sankardeva's example suggests that cultural survival requires not isolation but creative production. Assamese must remain a language capable of producing scholarship, science, philosophy, technology, literature and contemporary public discourse.

12. Literature, Borgeet, Bhaona and Ankiya Naat as Instruments of Social Reform

Sankaradeva's genius was his understanding that people do not experience society only through philosophical propositions. They experience it through stories, music, theatre, ritual and collective emotion.

The *Borgeet* transformed devotional philosophy into musical experience. The *Ankiya Naat* and *Bhaona* converted religious narratives into public performance. Such forms made abstract ethical and philosophical concepts accessible through visual and emotional communication [Barua, 1960; Neog, 1965].

Recent scholarship argues that the egalitarian ethos of Borgeet became embedded in communities formed around collective performance [Sharma & Hatikakoty, 2025]. Delhi University Publishing The implication is significant: culture itself can become an instrument of social reform.

For contemporary Assam, this principle is highly relevant. Social messages concerning gender equality, environmental conservation, communal harmony, drug abuse, corruption and responsible citizenship could similarly be communicated through theatre, music, cinema, digital storytelling and local cultural forms. Sankardeva's lesson is therefore not simply to preserve Bhaona but to use culture as an instrument of public education.

13. Sankaradeva and Social Integration

The most enduring social achievement of Sankardeva was his contribution to the idea of a shared Assamese social world. Assam has historically been characterised by ethnic and linguistic plurality. Sankardeva's movement provided a cultural framework within which diverse groups could participate in a common tradition.

This process should not be interpreted as complete homogenisation. Dhurjjati Sarma's work demonstrates that Sankari culture itself emerged through interaction with Assam's plural linguistic and cultural environment [Sarma, 2023]. ResearchGate The strength of Sankardeva's cultural contribution therefore lies not simply in creating sameness but in creating sharedness.

This distinction is especially important for contemporary Assam. A plural society does not require every community to abandon its distinct identity. Rather, it requires common institutions and ethical principles through which differences can coexist.

14. Sankaradeva and Caste

The question of caste requires careful historical treatment. Sankardeva's movement weakened the exclusive relationship between ritual status and access to devotional participation. Historical scholarship records the participation of people from communities outside the conventional Brahmanical elite [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966].

Yet it would be historically inaccurate to claim that caste disappeared under Neo-Vaishnavism. Social hierarchy persisted, and different Sattric traditions developed their own structures. Modern historical-sociological research recognises both the egalitarian potential of the movement and the subsequent emergence of institutional differentiation [Ahmed, 2022]. IJNRD

The contemporary relevance of Sankardeva therefore lies not in claiming that Assam has historically been free from caste but in recovering the principle that spiritual worth and human dignity cannot be determined by inherited status.

This principle remains important in contemporary Assam because caste and community continue to intersect with education, employment, marriage, land, political representation and social prestige. Sankardeva's ethical vision can therefore be interpreted as a resource for challenging inherited discrimination while recognising the historical complexity of Assamese society.

15. Sankaradeva and Women: A Necessary Critical Reassessment

The question of women is one of the areas where contemporary scholarship requires particular caution. The movement enabled women to participate in various devotional and cultural activities, and women have historically played important roles in Namghar-based religious life [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate

However, participation should not be confused with equality in institutional authority. Contemporary studies indicate that women's representation in formal Sattric governance remains limited in many contexts, and certain Sattric practices have historically restricted women's institutional roles [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate

Therefore, Sankardeva's legacy should be read critically. The reformist principle of spiritual dignity can be extended in the twenty-first century into a stronger principle of gender equality than was institutionally realised in the historical movement.

This has direct relevance to Assam's contemporary concerns regarding women's education, employment, political participation, property rights, gender-based violence and wage inequality. If Sankardeva's ethical principle is that every human being possesses spiritual dignity, then contemporary Assamese society must extend that dignity into social, economic and political equality.

16. Non-Violence, Compassion and Social Ethics

Sankaradeva's devotional philosophy placed considerable importance on compassion, humility, ethical behaviour and non-violence [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966]. This ethical dimension is particularly relevant because social reform cannot be sustained through institutional change alone.

Contemporary Assamese society faces various forms of violence—ethnic conflict, political hostility, domestic violence, online abuse, communal polarisation and interpersonal aggression. Sankardeva's emphasis on devotional humility and social harmony offers an alternative ethical framework.

His teachings should not be interpreted merely as instructions for religious devotees. They can be understood as a broader proposition: a society cannot remain socially cohesive if public life is dominated by hatred, humiliation and violence.

17. Sankaradeva and Contemporary Communal and Ethnic Relations

Contemporary Assam is characterised by significant ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. This diversity is both a strength and a source of political tension. Sankardeva's greatest contemporary relevance may therefore lie in his ability to demonstrate how cultural integration can coexist with diversity.

The Sankari tradition historically interacted with multiple communities rather than emerging within an ethnically isolated society [Neog, 1965; Pathak & Palit, 2023]. Recent research identifies social integration and inter-community cohesion among the movement's long-term consequences [Pathak & Palit, 2023]. Granthaalayah Publication

The lesson for present Assam is that Assamese identity should be conceived as a civic-cultural identity rather than an instrument of exclusion. Cultural confidence does not require hostility towards other identities. A mature Assamese identity can preserve its language, literature and historical memory while respecting the legitimate cultural existence of other communities.

18. Relevance to Education and Youth

Sankaradeva's educational significance is often underestimated because his educational system did not resemble the modern school. Nevertheless, his use of literature, music, theatre, collective discussion and vernacular communication demonstrates an educational philosophy based on cultural participation [Barua, 1960; Neog, 1965].

Contemporary Assam faces youth unemployment, migration, educational inequality, digital distraction and weakening engagement with local history. Sankardeva's model suggests the importance of connecting education with community and culture.

A modern Sankardeva-inspired educational philosophy would not mean teaching only devotional literature. It would mean creating an educational system where Assamese history, ecology, literature and cultural traditions coexist with science, technology, economics and modern professional knowledge.

19. Relevance to Women's Empowerment

The contemporary interpretation of Sankardeva should extend beyond the historical limits of the movement. If his central social principle is human dignity, women cannot remain confined to symbolic participation.

Assamese society requires greater female participation in higher education, science, administration, entrepreneurship, politics, research and cultural leadership. The contemporary reconstruction of the Sankari ethos should therefore emphasise participation rather than merely protection.

The historical limitations surrounding women's institutional participation should not be reproduced in the name of tradition. Instead, the ethical core of the tradition can be used to support greater inclusion. This approach transforms Sankardeva from a historical monument into a living ethical resource.

20. Relevance to Corruption and Public Morality

One of the less explored contemporary applications of Sankardeva is public ethics. His emphasis on humility, devotion, restraint and ethical conduct can be interpreted as an alternative to the growing separation between religious identity and public morality.

Contemporary Assam, like other societies, confronts corruption, misuse of public resources, political patronage and declining institutional trust. Religious observance cannot compensate for unethical public conduct. The true relevance of Sankardeva would therefore be measured not by the number of religious ceremonies but by the ethical behaviour of citizens.

In this sense, the Sankari principle can be reformulated as: devotion without ethical conduct is socially incomplete.

21. Relevance to Environmental Ethics

Although Sankardeva did not formulate modern environmental theory, his emphasis on humility, restraint, compassion and the interconnectedness of creation provides an ethical basis for contemporary environmental thinking.

Assam is particularly vulnerable to floods, erosion, wetland degradation, deforestation and ecological disruption. A development model that treats nature purely as an economic resource conflicts with an ethical worldview based upon restraint and responsibility.

A contemporary interpretation of Sankardeva could therefore encourage environmental responsibility through Namghar-based awareness programmes, community conservation, protection of wetlands and rivers, and cultural education

about the ecological heritage of Assam.

22. Sankaradeva in the Age of Digital Society

The contemporary Assamese public sphere has moved from Namghar-centred communication towards television, social media and digital platforms. Yet the underlying question remains similar: how can society communicate ethical values collectively?

Sankaradeva's genius was not tied to one medium. He used the most accessible media of his time—language, song, theatre, performance and collective worship. Contemporary society must similarly use the media of its own time.

A twenty-first-century Sankari cultural movement would therefore use social media, podcasts, documentaries, digital archives, online Assamese literature, educational videos and digital Bhaona to communicate values of harmony, equality and cultural confidence.

The principle is simple: Sankaradeva teaches us to democratise communication, not to remain permanently attached to historical forms of communication.

23. Limits and Contradictions of Sankaradeva's Reformism

A serious historical study must also identify the limitations of Sankardeva's reform project. First, his egalitarianism should not be equated with modern democratic equality. His movement operated within a medieval social structure and retained many features of its historical context.

Second, the later development of Sattras produced institutional hierarchies. Saikia's study demonstrates that the Sattra tradition evolved into multiple institutional and theological formations with different relationships to society [Saikia, 2018]. Utlib OJS

Third, gender equality remained incomplete. Women's participation in devotional life did not automatically produce equal institutional authority [Borah, 2022]. ResearchGate

Fourth, the later appropriation of Sankardeva as a symbol of Assamese identity can sometimes transform a universal ethical message into an exclusionary cultural identity. Such appropriation is historically problematic because the strength of his movement derived partly from its capacity to bring different communities into interaction.

Therefore, the correct contemporary approach is neither uncritical celebration nor wholesale rejection. Sankardeva should be interpreted historically, critically and creatively.

24. Key Findings

The study identifies several major findings. First, Sankardeva was not merely a religious preacher but an architect of social organisation. His reform programme connected religious doctrine with institutions, literature, music, theatre and community participation [Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966].

Second, the movement's egalitarian potential emerged primarily through accessible devotion and collective participation. It challenged the concentration of religious authority and opened new possibilities for social interaction.

Third, the Namghar represented a distinctive community institution whose significance extended beyond religious worship. It functioned historically as a space of collective interaction, cultural transmission and community organisation.

Fourth, the Sattra became a major centre of cultural preservation and institutional continuity, although its later development also generated new hierarchies.

Fifth, Sankardeva's use of Assamese contributed substantially to the vernacularisation of religious and philosophical knowledge and to the development of Assamese literary culture.

Sixth, Borgeet, Bhaona and Ankiya Naat demonstrate that cultural production can operate as a mechanism of social education.

Seventh, Sankardeva's vision of social integration has contemporary relevance in a multiethnic and multireligious Assam, particularly in relation to communal harmony and ethnic coexistence.

Eighth, his legacy provides useful ethical resources for addressing contemporary problems such as social fragmentation, violence, intolerance, corruption and cultural insecurity.

Ninth, the historical limitations of the movement—especially gender inequality and institutional hierarchy—must be acknowledged rather than concealed.

Finally, the most meaningful way to preserve Sankardeva's legacy is not merely to celebrate his birth anniversary, perform rituals or reproduce traditional forms. It is to apply the ethical substance of his reformism to contemporary social problems.

25. Conclusion

Srimanta Sankaradeva occupies a unique position in the social history of Assam because his contribution cannot be confined to any single category. He was simultaneously a religious thinker, social reformer, literary innovator, dramatist, musician, institution-builder and cultural organiser. His historical achievement lay in bringing these apparently separate spheres together into a coherent programme of social transformation.

His reform movement emerged within a complex medieval environment characterised by religious plurality, political fragmentation and social differentiation. Rather than seeking reform exclusively through political power, Sankardeva used the resources of religion and culture. Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma provided the philosophical framework; the Namghar provided the community institution; the Sattra provided institutional continuity; Assamese literature provided the language of communication; and Borgeet, Bhaona and Ankiya Naat provided the emotional and performative medium.

The most significant feature of this system was accessibility. Sankardeva understood that social transformation requires ideas to move beyond intellectual elites. His religious philosophy therefore entered everyday life through language, music, performance and collective participation. This explains why his influence survived for centuries.

His social reformism, however, must be interpreted historically. It would be anachronistic to portray him as a modern democrat, feminist or secular social reformer. His egalitarianism operated principally within the spiritual and devotional sphere, and later institutional developments generated forms of hierarchy and gender exclusion. These limitations do not diminish his historical significance; rather, they make his legacy more intellectually meaningful because they allow contemporary society to distinguish between the principles of reform and the historical institutions through which those principles were mediated.

For contemporary Assam, perhaps the most important message of Sankardeva is the possibility of unity without uniformity. Assam does not need cultural homogenisation to achieve social cohesion. It needs shared ethical values, common public institutions and respect for difference. Sankardeva's vision of collective participation can contribute

to such a framework.

His legacy can also be extended to contemporary questions of women's empowerment, youth education, communal harmony, environmental responsibility, public morality, cultural preservation and digital communication. The Namghar can be reimagined as a space of community dialogue; Sankari literature can be connected to modern education; Bhaona can address contemporary social problems; and the ethical principle of human dignity can be extended to all citizens irrespective of caste, gender, ethnicity or religion.

The greatest tribute to Sankaradeva, therefore, is not the preservation of his memory as a distant medieval saint. It is the continuation of his reformist impulse in a changing society. His historical message was that social transformation becomes durable when spirituality, ethics, culture, education and community life reinforce one another. In twenty-first-century Assam, this remains a powerful proposition.

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