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Srimanta Sankardev and the Philosophy of Ek Sarana Dharma

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Abstract

Srimanta Sankardev (1449–1568 CE) stands as the most transformative figure in the religious, cultural, and literary history of Assam. Through the formulation of Ek Sarana Dharma, or “religion of single devotion”, he restructured Assamese society by rejecting ritualism, caste hierarchies, and sectarian conflict in favor of direct devotion to one Supreme God, Krishna. This article examines the philosophical foundations of Ek Sarana Dharma, its socio-cultural objectives, and its enduring impact on Assamese identity. Using textual analysis of Sankardev’s own work Kirtan Ghosha, borgeet, Ankiya Naat and secondary scholarly interpretations, the study argues that Ek Sarana Dharma was not merely a religious doctrine but a comprehensive reform movement that democratized spiritual access and created new forms of art, performance, and community organization. The findings suggest that Sankardev’s philosophy anticipated modern ideas of egalitarianism and vernacular empowerment, making it relevant beyond its 16th-century context.

Keywords: Srimanta Sankardev, Ek Sarana Dharma, Neo-Vaishnavism, Assam, Bhakti Movement, Satra, Namghar, Krishna Bhakti.

1. Introduction

The 15th–16th century in India was marked by the rise of Bhakti movements that challenged orthodox Brahmanical authority and emphasized personal devotion over ritual sacrifice. In this pan-Indian wave, Assam produced its own architect of reform: Srimanta Sankardev. Born in Alipukhuri, present day Nagaon district, Sankardev lived through the reigns of the Ahom, Koch, and local petty kings. He witnessed a fragmented religious landscape Tantric Shaktism, residual Buddhism, tribal animism, and orthodox Vaishnavism often competing for social dominance. Against this backdrop, Sankardev formulated Ek Sarana Dharma, literally “the path of one refuge”. The core proposition was radical in simplicity: there is only one God, Krishna/Vishnu, and salvation mukti comes through sarana or surrender to Him through nama-kirtan congregational chanting of His names. By translating Sanskrit scriptures into accessible Assamese and creating institutional forms like the Satras and Namghars, Sankardev made spiritual liberation available to all castes, genders, and ethnic groups. This article seeks to unpack the philosophy of Ek Sarana Dharma as conceived by Sankardev. It places his thought within the broader Bhakti tradition while highlighting its distinct Assamese character. The goal is not hagiography but critical understanding: what did Sankardev object to, what did he propose instead, and how did his methodology shape centuries of Assamese culture?

2. Object of Study

The primary object of this study is the philosophy and

praxis of Ek Sarana Dharma as articulated by Srimanta Sankardev in his literary and theological corpus. Specifically, the study focuses on:

- The ological core: The concept of Nirguna Brahman with Saguna manifestation in Krishna, the rejection of idol polytheism, and the doctrine of Sarana.
- Social reform agenda: Critique of caste, ritualism, animal sacrifice, and priestly intermediation.
- Cultural methodology: Use of vernacular language, music, drama, and community institutions to propagate philosophy.
- Institutional outcomes: Formation of Satras as monastic centers and Namghars as congregational prayer halls.

Secondary objects include comparative analysis with other Bhakti saints like Kabir, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and Namdev to locate Sankardev’s uniqueness.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, text-based methodology rooted in humanities research:

- Primary Textual Analysis:** Close reading of Sankardev’s Assamese works, especially Kirtan Ghosha, Bhakti Pradip, Nimi-Navasiddha Samvad, and his Borgeets. Sanskrit sources he translated, such as the Bhagavata Purana Book X, are referenced to trace his interpretive choices.
- Historical-contextual Method:** Situating Sankardev within 15th–16th century Assam using historical records of the Ahom Buranjis, Koch dynasty

chronicles, and contemporary inscriptions.

- iii). **Comparative Bhakti Studies:** Contrasting Ek Sarana Dharma with other contemporary Bhakti streams to identify philosophical divergences.
- iv). **Secondary Literature Review:** Engagement with scholars like Maheswar Neog, Satyendra Nath Sharma, and David L. Dalton to triangulate interpretations.

4. Discussion

4.1. Historical and Religious Background of Sankardev:-

Sankardev was born in 1449 CE into a Kayastha family under the Bhuyan chieftains. His early life included a pilgrimage across North India for 12 years, where he encountered the Chaitanya Vaishnava movement in Bengal. However, scholars like Neog argue that Sankardev's theology developed independently and before his direct contact with Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Pre-Sankardev Assam was religiously plural but hierarchically rigid. Tantric worship of Goddess Kamakhya dominated, often involving animal sacrifice. Brahmanical orthodoxy controlled scriptural access through Sanskrit. Tribal communities had animist practices. Sankardev's genius was to recognize that religious conflict was rooted in complexity and exclusivity. His response was reduction and inclusion.

4.2. The Core Philosophy of Ek Sarana Dharma

Ek Sarana = Eka "one" + Sarana "refuge/surrender". The philosophy rests on five pillars:

- i). **Monotheism with personal deity:** Sankardev accepted the Vedantic idea of Nirguna Brahman—God without attributes but insisted that for devotion, Brahman must take Saguna form. He chose Krishna as that form, based on Bhagavata Purana. Unlike Advaita Vedanta which saw Saguna worship as lower, Sankardev made it the only path for Kali Yuga.
- ii). **Sarana-gati:** Surrender is both the means and end. The famous line from Kirtan Ghosha states: "Kali-kale nama-rupe Krishna avatar"—In Kali Yuga, Krishna descends in the form of His Name. Thus chanting "Hari" is equivalent to meeting Krishna. No ritual, pilgrimage, or austerity is mandatory.
- iii). **Rejection of ritualism and sacrifice:** Sankardev condemned himsa or violence in worship. He closed the door on Tantric animal sacrifices that were common in Kamakhya worship. This was both ethical and practical—removing economic burden from common people.
- iv). **Social egalitarianism:** "Jati nahi, kul nahi, nahi bheda-bhab"—No caste, no lineage, no discrimination. In the Namghar, everyone sits on the same floor. People from Kayastha, Kaibarta, Koch, and even converted Muslim communities became bhakats. Sankardev himself initiated people from diverse backgrounds as his disciples.
- v). **Vernacularization of theology:** He wrote in Brajavali and early Assamese, not Sanskrit. By composing Ankiya Naats in the local language, he ensured philosophy reached farmers and weavers, not just scholars. This was a deliberate democratization of knowledge.

4.3. Methodology of Propagation: Art as Theology

Sankardev understood that philosophy alone cannot transform society. He created an entire cultural ecosystem:

- i). **Namghar:** Literally "house of names". A community

hall with no idols, only the Manikut housing scriptures. This decentralized worship—every village could have one. It broke the monopoly of temples.

- ii). **Satra:** Monastic institutions that became centers of learning, agriculture, art, and social service. The Satra Adhikars were elected, not hereditary, creating democratic governance models.
- iii). **Borgeet and Kirtan:** 240+ devotional songs in ragas. Music was the vehicle for theology. Kirtan created collective emotional experience, which Sankardev saw as proof of divine presence.
- iv). **Ankiya Naat:** One-act plays like Rukmini Haran and Kaliya Daman. Using dance, masks, and drama, he taught theology to illiterate audiences. This was 16th-century "edutainment". This methodology shows Sankardev as not just a philosopher but a designer of cultural institutions. He anticipated that ideas need structures to survive.

4.4. Comparison with Contemporary Bhakti Movements

Sankardev's Ek Sarana Dharma shares DNA with the wider Bhakti movement but has key differences:

Aspect	Kabir/Nirguna Bhakti	Chaitanya/Gaudiya Bhakti	Sankardev/Ek Sarana Dharma
God Concept	Formless, abstract	Krishna with Radha emphasis	Krishna, <i>no</i> Radha theology
Institution	Loose, anti-institutional	Mathas in Vrindavan	Satra + Namghar system
Language	Sant Bhasha, dohas	Bengali, Sanskrit	Assamese, Brajavali
Social Base	Lower castes, urban	Brahmins + others	All castes, tribal inclusion
Art Forms	Minimal	Kirtan	Kirtan + Drama + Dance

Unlike Kabir's iconoclasm, Sankardev retained murti respect but removed murti puja. Unlike Chaitanya's Madhura Bhava with Radha-Krishna, Sankardev focused on Dasya Bhava—devotion as servant to master Krishna.

Findings

Based on textual and historical analysis, the study arrives at five key findings:

- i). **Ek Sarana Dharma was a theology of simplification:** By reducing the path to God to nama and sarana, Sankardev removed priestly intermediation. This was revolutionary in a society where Brahmins controlled ritual access.
- ii). **It was a sociology of inclusion:** The Namghar and Satra broke caste barriers in 16th-century Assam. Historical records show that Koch King Nara Narayan and later Ahom kings became patrons despite being non-Brahmin rulers. This political acceptance shows the social traction of the philosophy.
- iii). **Cultural innovation was theological necessity:** Sankardev did not create art for art's sake. Borgeet, Sattriya dance, and Ankiya Naat were all "technologies" to make abstract philosophy experiential. The finding is that for Sankardev, aesthetics = pedagogy.
- iv). **Ek Sarana Dharma created Assamese linguistic identity:** Before Sankardev, Assamese was not a literary language. By choosing Assamese over Sanskrit for religious texts, he gave the language prestige and a

canon. Modern Assamese identity owes its literary start to him.

- v). **The philosophy is non-sectarian despite being Vaishnava:** While centered on Krishna, Sankardev declared “Ek dev, ek seva, ek bina nahi koi”—One God, one service, none else. He included verses praising Ram and Narayan, and his followers absorbed tribal deities by reinterpreting them as forms of Krishna. This integrative approach prevented violent sectarian conflict in Assam.

Conclusion

Srimanta Sankardev’s Ek Sarana Dharma was more than a regional Bhakti sect. It was a comprehensive philosophical and social reform that answered three questions: Who is God? How can humans reach Him? What kind of society enables that journey?

His answer—One God, Krishna; Path of Name and Surrender; Society of equality and art—created a civilizational shift in Assam. 500 years later, the Namghar remains the center of rural Assamese life, Borgeet are sung daily, and Sattriya is a classical dance form of India.

Philosophically, Ek Sarana Dharma challenges the idea that complex ritual is necessary for spiritual depth. Sankardev showed that depth can come from radical simplicity and collective devotion. Socially, he demonstrated that religious reform works best when it creates new institutions, not just new ideas.

For contemporary India, Sankardev’s model offers lessons on vernacular empowerment, inter-community harmony, and using culture for social change. His philosophy reminds us that the most enduring reformers are those who speak the people’s language—literally and metaphorically.

Future research can explore comparative study of Ek Sarana Dharma with Sikh Naam Simran tradition, or its ecological ethics through the Satra’s community land management. But the core insight remains: Sankardev made God accessible, and in doing so, made people free.

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