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# Exploring the Humanistic Philosophy of Srimanta Sankardeva in the Material Culture of the Neo-Vaisnavite Traditions of Assam

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***Abstract: Initiated by Saint Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 CE-1568 CE) to improve the terrible socio- religious and cultural state of Assam at the time, the Neo-Vaisnavite movement was humanistic and creative. Sankardeva wanted to transform Assamese society by transforming its people into value searchers who achieve values via artistic and creative endeavors. His actions were motivated by his belief in "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma", which is the refuge in a single ultimate reality or God. He carried out this belief through a variety of mediums, including tales, art, institutions, and symbols. These establishments and artifacts have grown to be vital components of the Neo-Vaisnavite tradition's material and spiritual culture of Assam. Even though the laities currently utilize these items on a daily basis, a brief investigation would show that they originated from Saint Sankardeva's creative humanism. The present paper explores to find the material cultural identity of this tradition as the source of Srimanta Sankardeva's creative humanism.***

***Keywords: Humanistic, Philosophy, Saint Srimanta Sankardeva, Material, Culture, Neo-Vaisnavite, Traditions.***

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the period when medieval Assam's socio-religious conditions and evils were becoming more prevalent, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 CE–1569 CE) prospered. It made him realizes how important it was to put everyone under one roof and educate them about unity. Humanistic in spirit, the reformative plan he wished to carry out in order to salvage the shameful situation was the product of his altruistic thoughts and deeds. Neo-Vaisnavism, also referred to as creative humanism, is the name given to this humanistic movement that Sankardeva started. Indeed, his humanistic approach pulsated with inventiveness, and his worldview was a remarkable blend of pragmatism and spiritualism. This movement of the

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fifteenth century offered people a fresh perspective on life as well as a new manner of living. Sankardeva's Neo-Vaisnavism, grounded in the fundamental teachings of the Bhagavadgita and inspired by its monistic philosophy, promoted a way of life that emphasized spiritual practice and skill development, all stemming from the principle of 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' refuge in one ultimate reality. Using this tenet, he attempted to break through the barriers of caste, creed, gender, and religious prejudice and transform society such that it included individuals from all social classes, affluent and impoverished, well-informed and ignorant.

The prayer hall, or Naamghar, is the common roof he built to bring people together. Here, they can acquire the art of engagingly living through diverse ways and become enlightened with the truth. Saint Srimanta Sankardeva provided teaching in a straightforward, creative manner that was accessible to people from all walks of life. This teaching was delivered through a variety of objects, symbols, artwork, crafts, fables, music, dance forms, drama, and other mediums, and it is now a significant part of the material culture of the people of Assam in general and the Neo-Vaisnavite tradition in particular. Thus, an examination of these fragments would disclose the essence of Sankardeva's creatively embellished humanism, which is rooted in his central message of seeking solace in a single reality. It is one thing to formulate a philosophy or thinking, but it is quite another to apply it to the benefit of humanity.

**Statement of the Problem:**

Multiple biographies of Srimanta Sankardeva have resulted in numerous interpretations of his life and works from various perspectives. Sankardeva's “Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma” is not followed by all members of the communities of Assam. This is primarily because orthodox Brahmanic culture was prevalent in the Ahom kingdom at the time. Furthermore, multiculturalism's interventions have harmed and fractured the cultural integrity of the indigenous people of this region, impeding the development of Sankardeva's Sattras, Naamghar and Than, resulting in the current generation being unaware of the polymath's contributions.

## 2. RELATED WORKS

**Sonica Hazarika (2023),** in the paper "The Culture of Mukha Bhaona in the Sattras of Majuli" highlights that one of the main Bhakti cults, Neo-Vaisnavism, is preached by the Sattras. Unlike other mediaeval societies in a country like India, this Bhakti cult had a unique and imaginative personality that shared democratic, humanist, egalitarian, and organizational concepts to construct a classless civil society.

**Ravi Khangai (2019),** in the paper titled "Neo-Viashnavism and Social harmony in Assam" focuses that the majority of the medieval "Bhakti" movement was composed of Viashnavism. Although worship of Vishnu was already common in Assam, Sankardeva's introduction of Viashnavism caused much social unrest and had an impact on nearly every element of Assamese life, including the political, social, and cultural spheres. Thus, this became referred to as Neo-Viashnavism.

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**Satyajit Kalita (2018),** in his paper titled "A Comparative Study Between The Neo-Vaisnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva and the Other Vaisnavite Saints of India" focuses that Overall, it is clear that Sankardeva's conception of Bhakti and the neo-Vaisnvite faith had a variety of positive effects on the morally degraded, socially and politically collapsed medieval region of Assam. He has undoubtedly been greatly affected by the various philosophers, thinkers, and saints who have made significant contributions to the expansion and advancement of the Bhakti Cult.

**Baburam Saikia (2018),** in his paper titled "An introduction to the Sattra culture of Assam: Belief, Change in Tradition and Current Entanglement" highlights that Worshiping Vishnu as the ultimate deity in any of his many incarnations is known as Vaishnavism. Based on texts like the Yogini Tantra and the Kalika Purana, worship of Vishnu was common in Assam even prior to the arrival of Neo-Vaishnavism.

**Objective of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To study the creative humanism in the material culture of Assam's Neo-Vaisnavite Tradition.
2. To explore the humanistic principles of Srimanta Sankardeva within the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement.

**Significance of the Study:**

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, led by Saint Sankaradeva, has played a vital role in promoting social cohesiveness in Assam. Sankaradeva's ideas brought a socio-cultural rebirth to Assam during a time of turbulence and fragmentation. He built religious organizations that sparked significant reform in Assam. This movement had a significant impact on the Assamese society, cutting across caste and tribal lines. Sankaradeva's thoughts and philosophy influenced Assamese culture. As a result, studying his ideas, principles and philosophy from a social perspective is absolutely vital. Sankaradeva was not only a remarkable social reformer, but also a sociologist who aimed to improve social interaction and foster healthy relationships among Assamese people.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The present research paper is analytical and descriptive in nature with primary and secondary data as its foundation. Primary data is based on site explorations and photographs. Secondary data is collected from a variety of sources, including reference books, periodicals, edited books, journals, research papers, and research articles. The vision of Sankardeva's pragmatic philosophy is to comprehend it and see how it may be applied in a practical setting. In addition to reading his words, a study of his significant works, such as Naamghar, Sattra and Than, as well as the other crafts and artwork that characterize Neo-Vaisnavite tradition's material culture, are required to comprehend him. Because these are the important strategies he used to communicate the socio-spiritual message to the laypeople. It goes without saying that Sankardeva's teaching is rooted in his philosophy of seeking refuge in a single reality, even though it branches out into many

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profound ideas about life and the cosmos.
Sankardeva included allegories, parables, and symbols into his writings and teachings. Again, the objects kept in Naamghars, like the Guru Asana, etc., are also intended to function as symbolic reminders of the teachings of Sankardeva. Naamghar is therefore a place of prayer as well as a meeting place where laities can acquire survival skills and get insight into life's fundamentals. In addition, it provides a place to develop and improve what already exists, carrying on Sankardeva's wonderful teachings. The liberal accessibility and attractive presentation perfectly actualize Sankardeva's teachings on love and dedication, which are the prerequisites for reaching out to everyone and finally realizing the Absolute. Apart from the books he wrote, some of which are written in Vrajavali instead of Sanskrit for the common people's benefit, his design of interesting games like ankiyanat, satriya, bhaona, bargit, etc. show how the common people can be made to find the truth appealing.

The people view Sankaradeva as the embodiment of their culture of Assam. He came out of a time of social and political upheaval. Similar to the dominant Indian ideas of the fifteenth century, Sankaradeva's worldview is both revolutionary and spiritual. His philosophy is distinguished by its humanistic appeal, profundity, and suggestivity. His thinking is a vibrant synthesis of pragmatism and spiritualism. Despite the lack of dialectical competence and logical nuance in his ideas, his humanistic approach is full of inventiveness.
A real humanist, Sankaradeva was one of the greatest religious philosophers of the Middle Ages and the one who introduced the Neo-Vaishnavite worship to Assam. The artist, social reformer, and proponent of "Eka Sarana Harinama Dharma" was Sankaradeva. He was a theistic humanist who held to the idea that God exists. Theistic humanistic philosophers strive to promote human wellbeing and counsel others to do the same. The ultimate state of a human soul is ripeness.

The basic idea of Sankaradeva's teachings was humanism. His humanistic ideology was grounded in spiritualism and religion. Sankaradeva imparts the importance of unity. He declares that Brahman is one, infinite, all-pervasive, and inclusive; it is not diverse in the slightest. He attempts to dismantle all forms of human classification in the context of this philosophy and establish the universality, happiness, and oneness shown by nature.
To add some spice to the usually dull chants, Sankardeva had them recite using instruments such as the khol, manjira-tal, bhortal, and nagara. Daba and kah are also included in this category of instruments, which are presently called naamgharia prayer instruments. All these artistic representations serve the dual purposes of expressing transcendental reality and displaying aesthetic sensibility.

Srimanta Sankardeva looked for techniques that might lead to knowledge acquisition for each member of a community, ranging from student to all-around cultivator. Prior to the time of Srimanta Sankardeva, only the royal and priestly societies engaged in knowledge-seeking activities. However, Sankardeva made learning and knowledge-seeking accessible to everyone. He founded "Sattras, Naamghars and Thans," which developed into hubs for public education, visual arts, performing arts, culture, and literature as well as spirituality. The purpose of this study is to look at the traces of Sankardeva's creative humanism in the material culture of Assam's Neo-Vaisnavite tradition.

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## 4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The concept "humanism" has different meanings for different people. It is true that different individuals interpret it in different ways. It is the absence of individualism, rationality, secularism, and religiosity, according to some. Others may see it as a sign of interest in humanities, literary, and philosophical pursuits. Others, however, interpret it as a belief in the worth, relevance, and humanity of man and his experiences. Then, philosophers scarcely dispute that humanism has the highest significance as a man-centered philosophy, notwithstanding the diverse meanings it takes on in various circumstances.

Being creative is coming up with something new and original. It is an ability that yields the highest ideals. When a mind envisions, anticipates, and produces concepts and ideals, it is considered creative. Currently, "a man-centered philosophy which takes creativity to be the dominant, and most important, characteristic of the human beings" is what is meant to be understood by the technical term "creative humanism". Some characteristics of Sankardeva's school's creative humanism are - i) a positive attitude toward the molding of ethical and aesthetic human values for the betterment of the person and society; ii) a firm belief in the potential of man; iii) self-transcendence or egolessness; iv) faith, hope, and fidelity as prerequisites for the development of universal brotherhood; v) faith in a single ultimate reality; vi) treading a middle path; vii) secular ethics; and viii) spirit to serve humanity or unselfish love.

The humanistic movement tinged with creativity known as Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva emerged as a reformative movement of the preexisting order of human existence, similar to many other movements across the world.[1] Unquestionably, his creative humanism is a response to the social evils and biases that ruled Assam as a result of the immoral rites performed in the guise of religious belief, as well as the isms that fostered social division. But he didn't try to completely overthrow their ideas all of a sudden. Instead, he made an effort to make his plan come to pass via and in their trust. In this way, he spread the teachings of "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma", revealing his creative humanity. He used this idea as a tool to imbue his movement with a holy flavor. Furthermore, creative humanism and religion are not mutually exclusive.[2] Sankardeva considered creating a system that may be well-received by the people because social reformation was much needed by the Assamese society at the time. Here, he gave careful thought to the people's ethical and spiritual enlightenment above all else. He placed a strong emphasis on helping people reach their full potential in order to improve both their social and personal lives. Sankardeva's conduct demonstrates his unwavering trust in the potential of people. This further demonstrates his self-transcendence or egolessness[3] that enabled him to broaden his perspective and accept all people, regardless of their social standing, caste, or creed.

In Prahlad Caritra, Sankardeva tells the story of how love and acceptance can transform even an outcast into someone who can improve both themselves and society as a whole, illustrating his selfless compassion for all people.[4] His genuine attempts to improve people's social, spiritual, and economic circumstances brought faith, hope, and fidelity to his movement all prerequisites for the advancement of global brotherhood. The Gita ideal of loksamgraha (Bhagavadgita 3:20), which speaks of the welfare and well-being of the

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entire universe, is reflected in Sankardeva's philosophy. His ideology attempted to make the man a value seeker who acquires values via the pursuit of creative activity, based on the incomprehensible relationship between the methods of social and material life and the inventiveness of creative and intellectual work.

Despite advocating for "Eka Sarana Nama Dharm"a, the monotheistic ideal he upheld did not urge his adherents to adhere to the extremes of austerity or sensuality. Instead, he counseled them to find a middle ground by striking a balance between the two. He prioritized the reformation of the individual over the reformation of society in his approach. He contributed to social awakening by raising people's moral consciousness. Sankardeva's creative humanism included secular principles in this way.[5]

Man's creativity flourishes in a culture. Additionally, man, society, and their belongings and experiences can all be used to study culture. The material part of man as a social entity is made up of his arts, aptitudes, talents, and other skills, but the social aspect is made up of ideas, beliefs, customs, laws, and moralities. Each of us is a member of a network of material things that shape our lives and often define who we are. We become so attached to the objects via frequent use that the objects come to represent our tradition on occasion. They shape our material culture in this way. Things that authentically embody the principles and values of a tradition and are really valued by its adherents make up the material culture of that tradition. It covers the making, using, custom, trading, behaviors, standards, and rituals that the items either initiate or participate in.

Material culture serves as a bridge connecting individuals and the things they use on a daily basis. Material culture encompasses a wide range of items, including art which is further divided into subcategories such as painting, sculpture, textiles, etc., craft in all its forms, objects, myths, different symbols, musical instruments, ritual prerequisites, temple and prayer essentials, etc. Once more, the arts that the people practice as part of their tradition drama, dance, and songs also include material culture. Thus, Sattra, Naamghar, Than, Guru Asana, Gohainkapoor, Vrindavani Vastra, Pamorivastra, Mukha, Naagara, Tal, Khol, Ankiyanat, Satriya, Bhaona, Bargit, and numerous other practices that both materially and spiritually define this tradition may be considered a part of the Neo-Vaisnavite tradition of Assam.[6]

When the tradition's material culture is examined, it becomes clear that a large number of its components come from the artifacts that Sankardeva made to spread his moral and spiritual teachings. In addition to being striking examples of this tradition's rich culture, they also serve as a symbolic and artistic representation of the core teachings of Sankardeva. Ethics teachers and spiritual gurus have been imparting knowledge through various items, symbols, metaphors, tales, similes, and performing arts since ancient times. The spiritual gurus of various faiths conveyed their lessons to their followers through a variety of symbols, parables, allegories, and fables found throughout the Holy Bible, the Dhammapada, Jataka stories, and other writings. This approach was also used by Sankardeva to impart truth to his disciples. The wide variety of these things from philosophy, ethics, and social systems to literature, art, and culture as well as their diversity points to the vastness of Sankardeva's movement, which welcomes people with varying degrees of experience, aptitude, and decision-making. Because of his pragmatic approach and refusal to use academic jargon in his lectures, his philosophy was simple enough for laypeople to understand.

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Sankardeva founded the socio-religious institutions known as Naamghars, Sattras and Thans to serve as centers for the dissemination of knowledge and all forms of culture. In addition to being a place where people can improve themselves, it also teaches them survival skills. Through bringing people together for a shared purpose, Sankardeva subtly caused them to let go of their egos, forget their differences, and experience a sense of unity. The great saint then didn't rely just on lectures and writings that might frequently pass them by to enlighten people, the majority of whom were economically unstable and mentally challenged. He made great use of dramatics, dancing, singing, art, and other entertaining mediums.

Sankardeva employed symbols, parables, and allegories even in his writings and principles. Once more, the items housed in Naamghars, such as the Guru Asana, etc., are also meant to serve as symbolic reminders of Sankardeva's teachings. Thus, Naamghar serves as a location for prayer as well as a gathering place for laities to learn survival skills and become enlightened about life's principles. It is also a place to nurture and enhance what is already there, thus continuing the magnificent teachings of Sankardeva.

Sankardeva's teaching materials, which fall under the broad category of material culture and include art, drama, dance, songs, poetry, stories, and so on, are highly interconnected. To put them apart without dragging the other is just difficult.[7] This could be due to the fact that they are all representatives of Sankardeva's ekasarananama dharma, which is his main teaching. The Guru Asana (shrine) is one of the most important items in the Naamgharia tradition. Guru Asana is positioned at Naamghar with Gunamala on top. Idols are not welcome here. The shrine's calm layout subtly conveys the core ideas of Sankardeva's religion and philosophy. The qualities of the formless God are discussed in Gunamalais. The respectful placement of the object in the prayer hall (Naamghar) represents the formlessness of God/Absolute, while the lack of idols signifies Sankardeva's disbelief in the idolatrous system. It is positioned atop Guru Asana to give the formless Self the utmost significance. Reality is formless and one.

Sankardeva says that realizing the Absolute through deity worship and other rites is meaningless. The seven layers of the Guru Asana stand for the seven heavens. It is decorated with the image of flying lions defeating elephants. It is a metaphor for how the recitation of God's name destroys evils. Additional components of the main shrine's apparatus likewise allude to his philosophy's symbolic portrayal. The distinctive textile fabric adorning Gohainkapoor highlights the link he attempted to forge between spiritual pursuits and textile creation. Through the practice of religion, he attempted to restore the different natural features of people who would otherwise be estranged due to their caste affiliation through the textile artwork known as VrindavaniVastra.[8] Themes are stories from the heavenly plays and teachings from Lord Krishna, the Absolute Truth. The universe is nothing more than the appearance of God, the only Absolute Truth. This aspect of Absolute Truth resides within every one of us. According to Sankardeva, all living things have this Absolute essence, or God, within them. We look for Him outside when we miss Him inside (Neog, 2011, p.134). The path to the ultimate reality is paved by a sense of unity with other people. Because of our ignorance, it continues to be obscured from our vision.

In Bhaona, a mythology-based theatrical performance that represents Ankiyanat, a type of one-act play, this fact is cleverly illustrated by the pamorivastra, a piece of cloth that

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serves as a screen. It covers the actors before they enter the stage and is taken off when the character Krishna appears. The removal of the cloth suggests our release from ignorance, or enlightenment, whereas the veil represents our ignorance.

Sankardeva's teachings on love and devotion, which are the prerequisites for connecting with everyone and ultimately achieving the Absolute, are fully realized in their enticing presentation and liberal accessibility. In addition to the books he authored, some of which use Vrajavali in place of Sanskrit for the benefit of the populace, his creation of engaging activities such as ankiyanat, satriya, bhaona, bargit, etc. demonstrate how truth may be presented in an appealing way to the general public. He had them recite with instruments like khol, manjira-tal, bhortal, and nagara to lighten the otherwise boring chants. These kinds of instruments, which are currently referred to as naamgharia prayer instruments, also include daba and kah. The expression of transcendental reality and the exhibition of aesthetic consciousness are the dual roles that all these artistic representations play.

Sankardeva gave his followers a means of subsistence by having them produce these necessary items for prayer halls, musical instruments, and performing arts supplies. The Assamese now commonly employ sarai, an elevated tray used to place offerings; without it, a description of this ritual would likely fall short. Many people now work as mask makers (used by performing artists in bhaona), costume designers, wood panel engravers, etc. A long-standing tradition exists in certain sattras where the khanikars, or mask makers, appear to be supported solely by their craft. It alludes to Sankardeva's considerate care for the laities' spiritual and ethical development as well as their financial advancement. This is yet another example of Sankardeva's humanism's inventiveness, which supports people's means of subsistence via the creation of cultural objects. Therefore, these skills serve as a means of subsistence as well as a way for people to acquire the truth that Sankardeva wanted them to know.

Teaching using metaphor has also been one of Srimanta Sankardeva's special methods. He used a lot of metaphors in the majority of the books he wrote. He illustrated his teachings of truth which would not have been simple for the people to understand otherwise using the metaphors of animals and flowers. Kirtan Ghosa's book is divided into various chapters, each of which tells the story of a different animal that represents a distinct lesson from Sankardeva. As the story tells it, an elephant named Gajendra was playing in the pond when he was grabbed by a crocodile named Graha in Kirtan Ghosa's Gajendropakhyana. Despite Gajendra's greatest efforts, he was unable to break free from Graha's hold. because he felt that the latter's onslaught was heavy.[9] The brawl continued for a very long time. Gajendra eventually sought solace in Lord Hari (the Absolute One) when he thought he would be unable to fight any longer. With a lotus in his trunk, he beseeched Hari for his deliverance.

Metaphors and analogies of that kind are also widely used in other religious traditions. The lotus blossom was also utilized by the Buddha as a representation of purity of speech, body, and mind. Even though different religions have varied ideas on what the ultimate truth is, aspirants to all of them prepare similarly to reach the objective. This usage of metaphors and similar language serves as a message in this instance.[10]

**Major Findings of the Study:**

The major findings of the study are-

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1. In the contemporary world, Srimanta Sankardeva's teachings and the ideas he introduced on humanistic philosophy are extremely valuable.
2. Srimanta Sankaradeva worked tirelessly to develop the socio-economic, religious and cultural aspects of Assam.
3. Sankardeva began his reform work during a very difficult moment in Assam's history.
4. Sankardeva encountered opposition at every point about human and socioeconomic progress.
5. Even just a single word in support of women's honor back then was akin to authoring a book on the subject today.
6. Only by making such a comparison can we estimate Sankardeva's contribution to the feminist movement.
7. Srimanta Sankardeva is unquestionably a pioneer in the feminism movement.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is just as hard to define truth as it is to comprehend it. When the audience is ignorant, it is more difficult. And when it is presented to them solely orally, it becomes even more challenging. Sankardeva took into consideration each of these aspects when creating his humanistic movement. His intention was to rebuild society through the holistic human development of the populace that is, their intellectual, spiritual, social, cultural, and artistic development. His founding of Sattras, Naamghars and Thanas and among other things was intended to increase people's openness to life's lessons. In an attempt to foster a sense of togetherness and equality among all groups of people, he made it easier for them to learn under one roof. His dramas and plays, which are on show in Naamghar, demonstrate the many approaches to happily teach spiritualism to everyone, even the impoverished and unappreciated. Though they are a component of performing his plays, popularizing arts and crafts is a clever approach to give those who are struggling financially a means of support. Sankardeva therefore created the artifacts that are an integral element of this tradition's material culture with the primary goal of relieving people's suffering and illuminating the road toward a meaningful life. It is now up to the conscientious adherents of this tradition to revisit the principles underlying these artifacts and prevent them from becoming simply props for trivial rites.

**Glossary of Terms:**

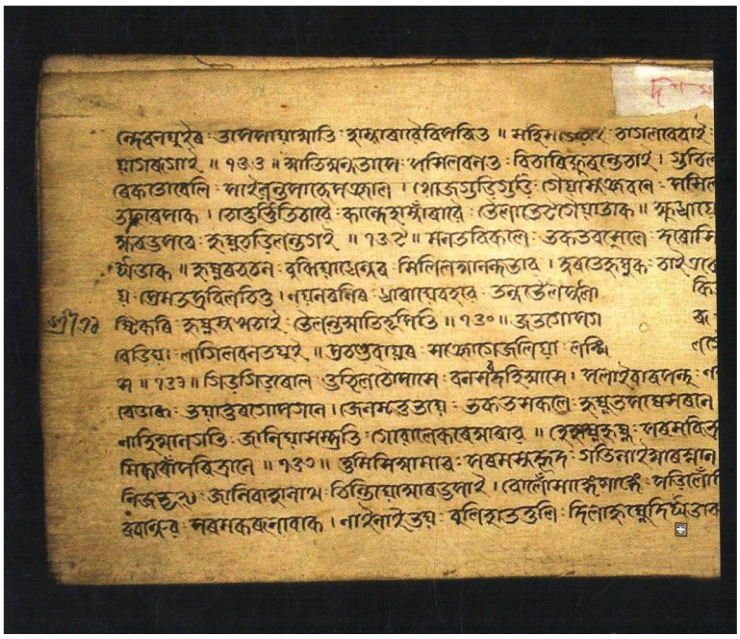
| | |
|---|---|
| Sattra : | The Vaishnavite Monastery in Assam |
| Naamghar: | The Community prayer hall in Assam |
| Than: | Than means Sthana where people live for long time towards socio-cultural activity. |
| Naam: | The chanting of the name of the ultimate being and singing his praises. |
| Guru: | Veneration of a Guru or preceptor. |
| Bhakat: | The connection or the assembly of followers. |
| Bhakat: | The devotee under the Sattra. |
| Borgeet: | The devotional songs of Assam |
| Neo-Vaishnavism: | A Philosophy of enlightenment of the human conscience through Universal love. |

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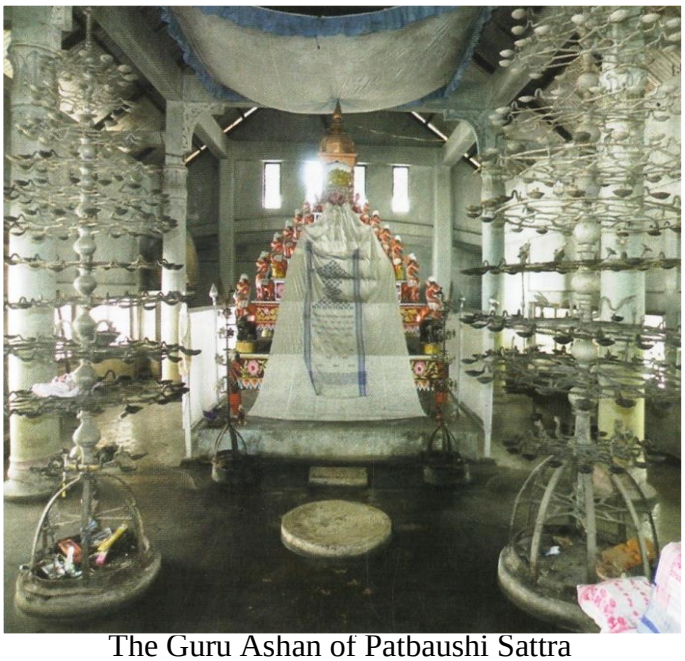
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Ek-Sarana-: The name of the ultimate entity i.e. lord Krishna
Mukha: Mask

**Photographs:**



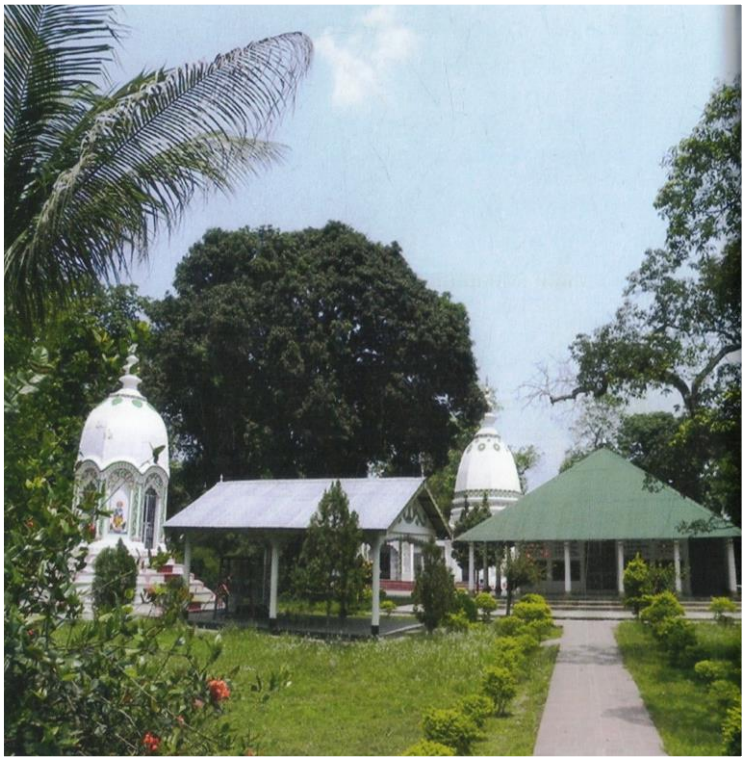
Hastaakshar: The hand writing of Srimanta Sankardeva



The Guru Ashan of Patbaushi Sattra

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