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An Historical Analysis of Srimanta Sankardeva's Contribution to Language, Literature, and Culture of Assam

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Abstract: ***The Assamese polymath Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 CE-1568 CE) made a substantial contribution to the development of language, literature and culture in the 15th and 16th centuries of Assam. He was a trailblazer in the fields of education, language, literature, art and culture. Saint Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavite movement is a massive socio-religious and cultural revolution in Assam that plays a significant part in forging close social ties among the state's citizens. Sankardeva's contributions have improved the language, literature, and socio-cultural environment of Assam, however the language has lost some of its original traditions within the Assamese community, for which he most likely supported the Neo-Vaishnavist movement. This is seen in the current cultural setting of Assam, where a plethora of other cultural activities that were inspired by the saint-scholar have erupted and became part of the original customs. Furthermore, several histories of Sankardeva have misrepresented some details of his life.***

Keywords: Contribution, Srimanta Sankardeva, Language, Literature, Culture, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Srimanta Sankardeva was a multifaceted figure. The social reformer, artist, and spiritual guide Srimanta Sankardeva's concepts, ideas, cultural input, values, teachings, and philosophy became integral to Assamese culture. He was also a renowned scholar. In Assam, he propagates Neo-Vaishnavism and revitalizes the entire society by restoring social structure, cultural integrity, and religious and cultural values.

The society of Assam was greatly influenced by Srimanta Sankardeva's religious activities and sermons. Sankardeva's primary goal, inspired by the Bhakti movement, was to convert Saktism to Vaishnavism. Sankardeva's books, Bhakti Pradipa, Anadi Patona, Nimi Navaridha Samvada, Bhakti Ratnakar (in Sanskrit), and Gunamala, laid the groundwork for his Bhakti

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doctrine. Bhagavata Purana (sections i, ii, vi, vii, viii, ix, x, xi, xii) was transliterated into Assamese terms and idioms by Sankardeva from Sanskrit. In addition, he translated the first and last cantos of the Ramayana (Adi Kanda and Uttara Kanda) into a language that the Assamese natives could understand at the time.

Statement of the Problem:
In literature, language, and culture, Srimanta Sankardeva was a poet, playwright, lyricist, drummer, and dancer whose works are unparalleled. His works have generated a lot of discussion and have been influential on later literature and science. Along with reforming the entire Assamese society, Sankaradeva's contributions to literature, dance, drama, music, painting, and other artistic mediums established the groundwork for Assamese culture. His artistic and literary creations have helped Assam maintain its live traditions, which is significant for research purposes as well as being extremely pertinent in the contemporary world.

2. RELATED WORKS

1. **Tillottama Mishra (2016),** in the paper “Literary Cultures in North East India: Shrinking Frontiers” highlights that the boundaries between the literary cultures of the Northeast have gradually shrunk from "trans-regional vernaculars to a confined and limited regional space, where atomization of cultures is more visible than development of cosmopolitan vernaculars."
2. **S. K. Chatterji (1966),** noted that in societies that are primarily monolingual, a writer must decide between using their "mother tongue" and a globalized language like English in the modern era or a cosmopolitan literary language like Sanskrit, Prakrit, Latin, or Persian in pre-modern times. However, in areas where the vernacularization of culture is still in its infancy, the distinctions between languages are still hazy, and authors select literary languages based on how they understand the developing cosmopolis of a given literary language.
3. **N. Tamna Singha (2020),** states in the paper “Sankardev: Livelihood and the Progress of Humankind” that almost as soon as the missionaries set foot in Assam, they saw the significance of Sankardeva in the state's social life. Singha highlights Dr. Miles Bronson's remarks regarding the significance of Sankardeva, which he made in a letter addressed to the Indian daily under the pen name "The Friend of India": "He came down to the level of the people and translated these portions of Hindu sacred books from Sanskrit, and presented them to the people in their own familiar dialect."
4. **Laksminath Bezbarua (1912),** first to compile Sankardeva's biography into two corpuses, "Sankardeva" and "Sri Sri Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhavdeva". But Bezbarua's description of Sankardeva was based on the scant materials at his disposal. As a result, the Vaishnava faith and philosophy saw resurgence among the general public.
5. **Dr. Maheshwar Neog (1961),** in his book “Sankaradeva”, which takes a more scientific approach to discussing Sankardeva's life and beliefs. He goes into great detail in this book about the socio-economic situation in medieval Assam and how Sankardeva propagated

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his religious beliefs during this time in history. The adherents of Sankardeva, as well as the Sattras and religious establishments he established, are also introduced in this book.

Objective of the Study:
The main objectives of the study are-
1. To study the historical significance of Sankardeva's contributions to the language, literature, and society of Assam.
2. To explore how language, literature, and culture relate to the teachings of Sankardeva for the overall development of Assam.

Research Questions:
1. Do Sankardeva's contributions to Assamese language, literature, and society have any historical significance?
2. How are literature, language, and culture related to Sankardeva's teachings and ideas for the entire development of Assam, both directly and indirectly?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary data form the study's foundation. Photographs, observations, and site exploration provide the basis of the main data. Secondary data collected from secondary sources, such as books, e-books, research papers, articles, e-resources, newspapers, magazines, paper clips, and reports published in periodicals etc. It uses an investigative approach to look at how biographers and other scholars have interpreted Sankardeva's contributions. This viewpoint has led to the division of his endeavors into two stages: the pre-bhakti sojourn and the post-bhakti sojourn. This division helps to understand his literary interests as well as cultural activities, which include religious rites that are accessible to individuals of all castes and creeds. Another plausible explanation is the prominence of orthodox Brahmanic culture at the time in the Ahom kingdom.

Original records from the field observation site at Sankardeva Than, Patbausi Sattra, Barpeta, Assam, where the saint spent around eighteen years of his life. He expanded the scope of this field's lgistic and sustainable development for dance, music, art, language, and culture.
Furthermore, the acts of multiculturalism have stretched and jeopardized the cultural integrity of the indigenous people in this region. In light of these problems, the aim of this article is to review the movement's weaknesses as well as to evaluate Sankardeva's achievements in the past. Sankardeva's method of bringing people together became widely used following his travels with his guru, disciples, and followers to the northern and southern regions of India. But the preceding knowledge that Sri Sri Madhav Kandali, his teacher, instilled in him has had a significant influence on his life as a scholar and socio-religious reformer. Sankardeva's literary endeavors can be categorized into two stages in this context: the pre-Bhakti sojourn and the post-Bhakti sojourn. A critical examination of these phases has been attempted.
The interests of a community can also be reflected in traditional knowledge. Certain cultures rely on their inherited wisdom to endure. Customs, sayings, and cosmological knowledge systems are examples of traditional environmental knowledge that can offer a conservation

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ethos for the preservation of biodiversity. Indigenous peoples have been creating artwork for millennia, including paintings, carvings, dances, and other forms of artistic expression, orally transmitted through tradition. Indigenous peoples' identity, cultural history, and means of subsistence are fundamentally based on their traditional knowledge.

Despite being a highly accomplished Sanskrit scholar, Sankardeva only wrote one book in Sanskrit; the other volumes were written for a mass audience in Brajavali Assamese. This traditional mode of communication in India is called "sadharaṇikaraṇa". In essence, Sadharaṇikaraṇa refers to the scientific method of intergenerational communication that the ancient Indian sages envisioned as a way to create a sense of commonality among all involved in a communication process through simplification. This process guarantees the uninterrupted flow of knowledge. To effectively communicate with the public, Sankardev used the ancient Indian habit of sadharaṇikaraṇa, as demonstrated by his preference for the Brajavali Assamese language over Sanskrit.

As a result, scholars may decide to do a thorough comparative study, beginning with the original manuscript and progressing through the biographies of eminent scholars, such as Lakshminath Bezbarua and Bapchandra Mahanta. Furthermore, future research may focus on a differentiating analysis between Vaishnavism and Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism, even if it is not the subject of this study paper.
As a singular masterpiece that would confirm the polymath's contribution to Assamese language, literature, and culture, the writings of Sankardeva and his adherents can also be utilized to examine the collision between the political and theological instability of the era.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sankardeva is the creator of Brajavali Bhasha. Prose was also introduced into Indian theater by him. There is a language in Bengali known as Brajabali that is comparable to an ancient Assamese language known as Brajavali. They are not equivalent, though. In the Mithila region, spoken language predominated in the 14^{th} and 15^{th} centuries AD. An idea of the kind of merger that Maithili has had with the Asamiya Brajavali bhasa may be found in the following phrases, which are cited verbatim: In his own words, Sankardeva explained this hymn as follows:

“sarva dharma eri eka śaraṇa sakṣaat |
biśvase sakhi laiyoka ahmata ||
nakariba bhay hera karon aṅgikara |
samaste papate mai karibon nisaara “||19

[Meaning: Do not fear; I will save you from all kinds of sins. Seek refuge in me and give up all other faiths. Arjuna was told by Krishna to abandon all other dharmas, including scarifying animals and worshiping deities, and to have a strong belief in the existence of a superior being. Sankardeva envisioned a society devoid of classes, signifying the ethos and principles of humanism.]

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Even though Sankardeva was a brilliant Sanskrit scholar, he only published one book in Sanskrit; the other volumes were all written in Brajavali Assamese for general readers. The term "sadharaṇikaraṇa" refers to this age-old Indian custom of communication. Sadharaṇikaraṇa essentially alludes to the scientific approach of intergenerational communication that the ancient Indian sages conceived as a means of establishing commonness among the participants of a communication process through the process of simplification. This method ensures the continuation of undiluted knowledge flow. Sankardev employed the age-old Indian custom of sadharaṇikaraṇa to effectively communicate with the masses, as seen by his preference for the Brajavali Assamese language over Sanskrit.

Sankardeva's influence lasted beyond his lifetime, as his thoughts and teachings influenced following generations, including important personalities like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, greatly contributing to their personal growth and development.[1] The ideal artist combined physical beauty and physical capability to achieve physical well-being in an unprecedented and artistically perfect manner. The artist practiced Brahmacharya and Yoga to maintain his mental health and gain control over his physical health, cognitive abilities, and emotional state.[2]

Sankardev identified Angkia Naat as the starting point of Assamese play in the fifteenth century. This type of dance-drama is distinct. With slokas, bhatimas, dance, music, and dialogues, Angkia Naats are a comprehensive work of art that combine to produce a type of superhuman beauty.[3] Sometimes, Sankardeva's stature as a preacher and spiritual reformer eclipses his status as a poet. The personification of Visnu as karma is the main theme of Sankardeva's poetry. This is frequently the main focus of the revived Vaisnava literature in India.[4]

The Sankardeva movement in Assam was followed by an explosion of outstanding literature. In their many songs, daramas, verse narratives, and other literary works, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva themselves elaborated on and emphasized the tenets of the religion they strove to spread.[5]

The exceedingly unclean Mlecchas now recite Nama Kirtana and can easily reach Baikuntha. However, Sankardeva inspired a vast number of tribes, including the Koches, Kacharis, Chutias, Matak, Moran, and Rabhas, to convert to Vaishnavism.[6]

Songs and dances have become an intrinsic element of the traditional culture of Assam. The most popular songs sung in Sattra institutions are Borgeets. Borgeets are a collection of celestial melodies set to distinct ragas. Some 30 ragas have unique characteristics. They are performed in anivaddva and nivaddva portions, just as other Indian traditional ragas. It should be mentioned that the bargaats are composed in a new language known as Brajavali. Srimanta Sankardeva authored the first Borgeet, "Mana Meri Rama Caranahi," during his first visit to Badrikarshram.[7]

Brajavali was widely used in Brajadhama, the house of Lord Krishna, Sankardeva may have utilized it as a means of communication to elevate bhakti, or devotion, in the eyes of the general public. A common conclusion reached by academics and researchers is that the language used in these plays is manufactured.

According to S. N. Sarmah, Bhattadeva is the author of authentic Assamese prose literature. According to him, Brajawali is a synthetic language that combines the archaic Assamese language with Maithili. However, demonstrates that Sankardeva's prose writing cannot be

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considered authentic Assamese prose. Here, it should be noted that the author subsequently stated that Sankardeva was the only Assamese prose pioneer to write "ankiya nat" in a mixed Indian language.

A key component of communication is language. Sankardeva created the Brajavali language, a synthesis of all the regional languages, in response to the sheer number of languages spoken there. This allowed people to communicate ideas and read and understand one another's languages simultaneously. In order to link Assam with the rest of India, Sankardeva also emphasized translation at the same time. Sankardeva used to often invite people from various states to Sattra and Naamghar in order to maintain communication and connectivity with them. The language itself is part of the Neo-Indo-Aryan language family, or rather the outer reaches of the Indo-Aryan groupings, with a distinct admixture of the Dardic speech of the Alpines. Its vocabulary is not solely based on Sanskrit. The Assamese script was derived from North Indian Brahmi and Devanagari. There are also several Assamese terms that are related to words in other Indo-European languages. The majority of the unwritten poetry and proverbs found in ancient Assamese literature are from pastoral ballads, Bihu folk songs, cowherd and boat songs, and other oral traditions.

Even though Assamese and Sanskrit literature was produced in ancient times, relatively few writing samples have survived. Among the Sanskrit compositions were Hema Sarasvati and Harivara Vipra were the first writers of the Pre-Vaisnava era. They wrote Prahalad Caritra and Babruvahana Parva, respectively, under the royal patronage of Durlav Narayan, the Kamata King, who lived in the late 13^{th} and early 14^{th} CE. During the fourteenth CE., renowned poets and translators Rudra Kandali, Kaviratna Sarasvati, and Madhaba Kandali produced numerous notable works. All of these pieces provide readers a sense of the people's literary customs and pursuits, showing that they were by no means unimportant.

It has been discovered that Sankardeva's stature as a preacher and spiritual reformer occasionally eclipses his renown as a poet. The personification of Vishnu as karma is the concise idea behind Sankardeva's poetry. This is frequently the main theme of India's resurgent Vaishnava literature in its entirety. Kirtan Ghosa, Harischandraupayana, Rukminiharana, Ajamil Opakhyana, Bali Chalona, Kurukshetra Yatra, Gopi Uddava Samvada, and Amrita Manthana are just a handful of Sankardeva's poetry compositions. For example, the Kirtana is not a single poem, but rather a carefully chosen set of 26 poems with roughly 2261 couplets in various meters. Nonetheless, the majority of the poetry are translations from the Bhagavata Purana. Other authors contributed two of its poems, Sahasra Nama Vrittanta and Ghunuça. The authors of the anthology included them at their request. They were composed, respectively, by two of his followers, Ananta Kandali (1540–1580) and Sridhara Kandali. Every poem in the "Kirtana" is a stand-alone kavya that is based on Sanskrit models and exposes a variety of dogmatic theological claims. The lyrics were read in religious assemblies and rites, as suggested by the name "Kirtana." Every poetry has a refrain, or "ghosa." The religious gathering's leader recites these poems. Following the reading of a couplet, the assembly claps hands in unison while the leader repeats the refrain, or "ghosa."

Drama: According to Sankardev, the Assamese drama known as Angkia Naat began in the fifteenth century.

Dance drama Angkiya Naat: Srimanta Sankardeva wrote the Angkiya Naats, which are attributed to the following: Cihna Yatra, Patni-prasada, Parijat Harana, Kalia Damana,

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Rukmini Haran, Keli Gopal, and Ram Bijoya. A significant form of Indian classical dance is recognized as Sattriya dance, or Sattriya Nritya. This performance art combines dance and drama and is believed to have originated in the 15th century in the Krishna-centered Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam. Bhaona, Songs (Borgeet), Naamghor (prayer house), Sattra (Vaishnava monastery). The Vaishnava monastery known as "Sattra" is recognized as a center of culture for promoting academic knowledge as well as stage acting, singing, and musical recital related to the Bhaona and Sattriya cultures. There are two main types of sattra: Grihastri sattra and Udashin sattra. While Bhaktas can enter domestic life under Grihastri Sattra, they lead celibate lives under Udashin Satra. Sattras are frequently referred to as multifaceted institutions that are used in sacred cultural rituals, religious discourses, literature, and the arts. The Sattras represent Assamese culture in terms of conservation, preservation, and transformation of artistic forms and expressions, such as dance, music, woodcarving, mask-making, and theater represented by Raas Lila, Angkiya Naat, and Bhaona, which are deeply ingrained in the folk and cultural traditions of the region and have become essential components of bhakti.

Sankardeva dedicated his early years to diligent study and preparation. His many translations and adaptations in Assamese in his final years testified to his grasp of the scriptures and his scholarship in Sanskrit. In addition to writing several Sanskrit verses that he included into his plays, he also collected a treatise on Vaishnavism in Sanskrit called Bhakti Ratnakara. Sankardeva wrote a beautiful poem consisting solely of consonantal wordings with the exception of the first vowel sound shortly after learning his alphabet. He also wrote a brief kavya Hariscandra Upakhyana around this time.

In 1481 CE., Sankardeva embarks on a lengthy trek after granting his daughter in marriage. About seventeen companions, including Mahendra Kandali, his previous Guru, went with him. The pilgrimage's specifics are documented in Sankardeva's biographies, which were written by his followers. He made visits to the majority of India's northern and southern temples and hallowed sites. Among the significant locations and shrines he visited were Ayodhya, Vadarikasrama, Mathura, Dvaraka, Kashi, Prayaga, Gaya, Puri, Varahakunda, Mathura, and Sitakunda. He conversed with Vaishnavite professors of different schools and shared a variety of theological and intellectual conversations with them while visiting these sacred sites.

Like many previous global movements, Sankardeva's humanistic, creative neo-Vaisnavism developed as reformative movements of the preexisting order of human existence.[8] Sankardeva’s deeds demonstrate his unwavering faith in other people's potential. This highlights his egolessness or self-transcendence.[9] Sankardeva helped to social awakening by increasing people's moral awareness. Sankardeva's creative humanism incorporates secular ideals in this way.[10]

The Vaishnavite movement that he later started in Assam was a direct result of these conversations and the mental impression they had on him. After twelve years of this kind of roaming through numerous holy colleges of Vaishnavite study, Sankaradeva came home a much-travelled man, having learned about Vaishnavite literature, theology, devotion, and institutional management firsthand. His first pilgrimage was this one. Sankardeva included the Naamghars and Manikuts using materials like wood, bamboo, and thatching grass, which was simpler for regular people to do. Due to his opposition to all prevailing hierarchical

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social norms, Sankardeva was not welcomed by conservatives or groups of individuals who were intolerance.

Major Findings of the Study:

1. Sankardeva's Cultural Revolution advanced Assamese society's advancement and the school of thinking.
2. The movement had a distinct framework thanks to borgeet, bhaona, music, and dance.
3. Two assumptions can be made, which are strongly refuted by Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism: first, that prominent Vaishnavite cultures around the world promote idol worship due to the traditional roots of Indian culture, and second, that Assamese culture should be preserved in order to prevent the blending of other cultures.
4. Sankardeva attempted to impose discipline on the society by using his novel idea.
5. The Sankardeva drama's thoughtfulness has brought together individuals from many backgrounds, opening the door for the integration of people of all castes, creeds, and even religions.
6. Sankardeva's play was intended to uphold social cohesion and end caste inequality.
7. Sankardeva's cultural institutions, the Sattra Namghor and Thanas, have played a significant role in introducing democratic ideas to the community.
8. Sankardeva aimed to educate and enlighten the illiterate and marginalized the people of Assam via the cultural activity.
9. Sankardeva's teachings still need to be acknowledged and taken seriously in order to raise awareness of Neo-Vaishnavism worldwide.
10. Literary pursuits of Sankardeva as well as take part in socio-religious and cultural trends like mass gatherings.

5. CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to cover Sankardeva's religious and literary corpus in this study. However, because of the richness of the Asamiya Brojavali language and culture, Assam's literary history witnessed a cultural revolution in the 15th and 16th centuries. The original manuscripts of Sankardeva and his students were unavailable because of limited access and insufficient tools for deciphering the ancient Assamese language.

Future research may focus on a comparative examination of Vaishnavism and Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism. The writings and teachings of Sankardeva and his adherents would constitute a singular masterpiece that would confirm the polymath's contribution to Assamese language, literature, and culture, and they might also be utilized to examine the collision between the political and theological instability of the era.

Glossary of Terms:

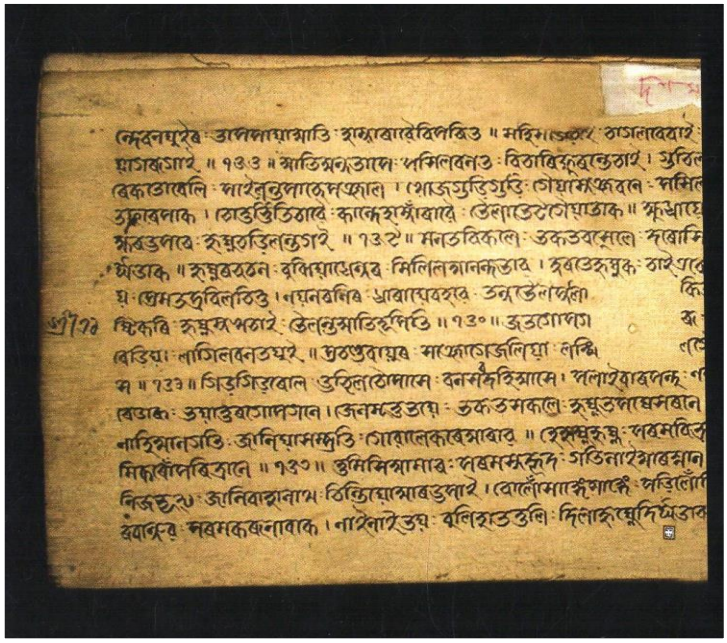
Ankiya Nat:	The Drama organised by the Vaishnava cult of Assam.
Borgeet:	The devotional songs of Assam
Dharma:	Morality and spiritual discipline work together to provide direction in one's life.
Neo-	A Philosophy of enlightenment of the human conscience through

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Vaishnavism: Universal love.

Photographs:



Hastaakshar: Srimanta Sankardeva's handwriting



The Sankardeva Than Patbaushi Satra's Guru Ashan

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