

CHAPTER 4

The Emergence of Sankardev: A Study of Unity in Diversity

This chapter concentrates on the emergence of Sankardev and his influence on Assam's *Satra* Culture and how it was organized. It also highlights how he unified the society baring the differences of belief and practices among the various caste, creed, communities in medieval Assam. India's Bhakti Movement began to spread throughout the nation in the 15th and 16th centuries because of several circumstances, including religious upheaval, the removal of social problems, the upliftment of the lower classes, equality for all, the resurrection of Hinduism, and the expansion of Islam monotheistic. Based on ancient traditional Hindu philosophy, Salvation (Moksha, Mukti) or release from the bondage of birth and death, which is the ultimate end of human life, can be reached through three means (marga), namely *Gyan* (knowledge), *Karma* (activity), and *Bhakti* (devotion). The Bhakti Movement is a term used to describe a movement that several Hindu saints started in medieval period to bring about religious reforms by embracing the devotional approach to obtaining salvation. (McCray 2)

In terms of religion, Bhakti refers to the sacrifice of devotion to an ultimate being that is personally imagined in order to find salvation. The origins of this theory can be traced back to the Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions of ancient India as well as to a number of sacred texts, including the Gita. The emergence of Bhakti as a widespread movement founded on religious equality and widespread social engagement, however, took place for the first time in South India between the 7th and the 10th century. The prominent saint-poets who led the movement reached its pinnacle in the 10th century, following which it started to wane. But a group of travelling scholars, or acharyas, starting with Ramanuja in the eleventh century, reinvented it as a philosophical and ideological movement (Dey 2). Even though Sankaracharya and others initiated the Bhakti Movement in the ninth century, it wasn't until the 15th century that it became more well-known as the Vaishnava Movement or Medieval Bhakti Movement. The Bhakti movement is unique in that it advocates monotheism as opposed to the polytheism that was prevalent in India. The Movement belongs to the Nirguna and Saguna schools of thought. The Nirgunas had a liberal viewpoint and disapproved of the caste system and Brahmanical rites and rituals in addition to believing in a formless God. Saints like Kabir, Dadu Dayal, and Guru Nanak headed it.

The Sagunas, however, thought that God was personified. Lord Vishnu (Vedic), Narayana (Upanishad), and Krishna (Mahabharata) were all revered. This form was spread by saints like Tutsi Das, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Surdas, Mirabai, Chaitanya, and others. Sankardev served as the Bhakti movement's leader in Assam. Vaishnavism, a faith that reveres Vishnu as the ultimate being, is one of the earliest in India. A key aspect of the Vaishnava Cult is the belief held by its adherents that Vishnu occasionally assumes various incarnations. Srimad Bhagawata Purana describes about the "Dashavatar," or the ten avatars of Vishnu. Hindus acknowledge he has taken many rebirths throughout his existence and that his tenth rebirth is imminent. Vishnu has taken many rebirths in order to fulfil his duty of protecting the universe and the law of the Vedas.

Before Sankardev, the socio-political situation in Assam was chaotic. The people were divided by a variety of jarring religious groups and other varied faiths and practices (Neog, Great Age 106). Blood sacrifices offered to gods and goddesses with piercing noises can be seen, night vigils for virgin worship, and obscene dances performed by temple ladies were among their religious practices (B. K. Kakati, 1978: 12). Assam painted a diverse picture of a diverse culture in the fourteenth century. Most of the population belonged to non-Aryan tribes. Each had their unique mannerisms, customs and religious practices. Shaivism predominated in this region during the time of Sankardev's birth in 1449 at Alipukhuri, close to Batadraba in the current district of Nagaon. It is also claimed that Sankardev's father Kusumvara gave birth to his son as a result of his worship of Shiva and gave him the name Sankara. In the Kalika Purana and Yogini-tantra, Shaktism is mentioned as another important religious practise. The description of the blood chapter of sacrifice, which was observed by the majority of people, included both blood and flesh was also frequently practiced during that time. For the sake of religious customs and observances, Shaktism adherents engaged in some wicked practices, including the sacrifice of animals and occasionally even humans. It's noteworthy that Sankardev's forebears, the Bara Bhuyan, were fervent Saktas in the past, and Madhavdev, Sankardev's preferred disciple, was also a Sakta. In such a worrying situation, Srimanta Sankardev raised public awareness about these types of wicked practices and promoted a cohesive religious ideology that helped Assamese society develop novel principles and social amalgamation. Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism has fought primarily against Shaktism, which is based on a vulgar materialist perspective, using its spiritual propaganda as a weapon.

Sankardev brought the Bhakti message to Assam through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, also known as the Eka-Saran-Naam-Dharma, which not only promoted

religious but also social and cultural harmony among various groups of people. Sankardev was inspired by the Bhakti Movement that he had seen while on his pilgrimage to various locations in India. Sankardev made contributions to society and culture, unlike any other reformer in history. By advancing the concept of the Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma, Sankardev eradicated apathy, paganism, and illogical opinions and performance. The Neo-Vaishnavism religion evolved a self-governing perspective that penetrates all of Assam's teachings and practices. Furthermore, a powerful method and uniting factor in the process of merging every one of the many kinds of society was Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism. In terms of its distinctive and original nature, when compared to the other Bhakti cults in India, Neo-Vaishnavism stands out. This quality manifests itself in the drive to build an order of citizens that follows the common principles of a democratic system, including harmony, equality, and empathy. The name of this brand-new factual doctrine that Sankardev founded is *Eka-Sarana-Naam Dharma*. Lord Krishna, also known as Vishnu, was the only God to whom Sankardev preached devotion (Bhuyan).

Religious reformer Sankardev led his followers to the unadulterated Vaishnava, a single faith religion. Sankardev spoke specifically concerning the conventional character of Hinduism. He exhorted his adherents to adopt the values of tolerance and Catholicity. By reciting the name of the almighty God, such as Hari, Rama, etc., one practice is known as *eka-sarana*. This system contains a vital element known as Sarana. The *Mahapurusiya* theology uses the term "eka sarana" to describe taking complete refuge in Vishnu-Krishna. The Sanskrit roots from which the term Sarana is derived, literally means shelter, refuge, protection, etc. (Chutia 23). Between the disciples and the Lord, there can be constant direct connection thanks to the Sarana system. This system does not have a caste or class structure. But he gave particular focus to keeping one's body, mind, and soul clean. Sankardev stopped worshipping idols and put a lot of focus on saying or singing the names of the Gods. Because he thinks that presenting them with what was good, rather than attacking what was terrible, was the greatest approach to transform a people's religious life. In his religion, it is forbidden to worship other deities. He holds Krishna to be the greatest God and everyone's savior. The belief system is known as the Bhagavati Dharma because it draws its inspiration and source from the Srimad-Bhagavata Purana (Chutia 23).

This chapter analyses the Neo-Vaishnavite phenomenon in Assam as an important social and cultural upheaval and its impacts on Assamese residents' relationships with others as how Sankardev brought various tribes and communities under one umbrella by installing Neo-Vaishnavism and later the *Satra* Culture in Assam. Sankardev's varied

genius revolutionized every aspect of Assamese civilization. He created the Assamese society's foundation. He brought a brand-new branch of faith with just one God to Assam. As Assamese state's foremost spiritual leader, he emphasized 'Bhakti' in his simplified religious practices and translated the Holy Scriptures into common languages to make them understandable to all parts of society.

Early phase of Sankardev's life:

It is necessary here to focus on the early life of the great saint. Sankardev lost both his mother Satyasandha and father Kushumbar Bhuyan at a young age. Later, his grandmother Khersuti took care of him. At the age of 12, Sankara got admitted into a tol (school) where he was taught by renowned Brahman scholar Mahendra Kandali. Early in his education, Sankara wrote a hymn titled "Komal Geet," a gentle song in which only the letter "a" is used as a vowel (Goswami, 8). Mahendra Kandali discovered another outstanding quality in this little student when he observed a giant cobra spreading its hood to shield the infant from the hot sun as the boy was drifting off to sleep. Mahendra Kandali, who witnessed this astonishing event, concluded that this youngster was not unusual and asked the other students at the tol (school) to refer to Sankara as Sankardev. Although little information about what Sankardev was taught at school has been discovered, certain sources, such as the *Katha Guru Charita*, mention that Sankardev learned the Vedas, Upanishads, the two Epics, Puranas, Samhitas, the Tantras, grammar, lexicon, and kavyas in order to master himself (Neog, Sankardev 17). Sankardev practised yoga and was drawn to it greatly during his school years. During this time, his poetic composition Harichandra Upakhyan was published. After spending ten years at the tol and becoming a finished scholar, Sankardev was assigned the responsibility of Siromoni Bhuyanship because he comes from a family of landlords. Sankadeva, however, had a strong preference for an intellectual life combined with scholarly pursuits and spiritual growth. Sankardev married Suryavati in the year 1470 after being compelled to do so by his family and friends. Sankardev demonstrated his administrative abilities while serving as Siromoni Bhuyanship for four years. Suryavati gave birth to a daughter kid named Manu or Haripriya four years after they were married. However, she died in the interim, which had a profound impact on Sankardevs' thoughts and caused him to become disinterested in earthly matters. Grieving over what had happened, he made the decision to embark on a pilgrimage, but he ultimately

opted to stay until he had to perform the ritual of marriages for his daughter to Hari, a Kayastha lad.

According to Maheswar Neog, Sankardev embarked on his first pilgrimage trip with seventeen companions in the year 1481 after delegating control of the household duties to his son-in-law and releasing the Bhuyanship to others. However, some biographies stated that Sankardev was escorted by twelve or fifteen people. Sankardev went on his trip for several reasons, including the fact that he was grieving greatly over the sudden death of his wife. The other reason for Sankardev's pilgrimage, according to Sarat Kumar Phukan was to learn more about other older saints and their lives, to increase his knowledge, to understand the spirituality, sanctity, and sacredness of some of the holy shrines' miracles, and to gain more information of how to establish Neo-Vaishnavism as the foundation for organising the chaotic socio, religious, cultural environment (S Phukan 219). He spent twelve years travelling to almost thirty-six different holy locations, including Vrindavan, Mathura, Kurukshetra, Prayag, Gaya, Haridwar, Badarikashrama, Puri, Pushkar, Rameshwarsetukhanda, Dwarka etc. where he encountered people of varied theological perspectives. One of his early lyrics (bargeeta), "Mana meri Rama Charan hilagu," which is regarded as the first composition of this sort of lyrics, was written by him at the holy site of Badarikashrama. However, he spent most of his pilgrimage in JagannathaKshetra in Puri. His travels and stays in cities like Puri and Banaras had a significant impact on his career and helped to shape it to a large extent. He discovered therefrom the mission of his life, and also could discern the way by which he was to achieve that mission (Neog, 104). Lakshminanda Bora holds the opinion that, it was Vrindavana which captivated Sankardev so greatly (Bora 2014). It can be recalled that among the different people who came in contact with Sankardev during his pilgrimage, of which the famed Goswami brothers, Rupa and Sanatana gained initiation from Sankardev at Vrindaban.

After a twelve-year term of pilgrimage, Sankardev returned home in 1439 with a new religion that had taken off throughout the rest of India. He then launched his Neo-vaishnavite movement. Sankardev, however, was granted two wishes by his locals and kinsfolk: the first was to resume his administrative duties as Bar-Bhuyan or Siromani Bhuyan, and the second was to remarry. Although he rejected both requests, he was unable to resist the second one. Sankardev, however, had in mind living a life of devotion through Bhakti dharma. At this time, Assam's socioeconomic and political landscape was

disorganized. Unrest, violence, casteism, exploitation, anarchy, religious dogmatism, superstitious beliefs, poverty, illiteracy, and a host of other issues were prevalent. The eradication of the society's faults was urgently required at such a pivotal time. Sankardev had already decided that social reformation would be his life's purpose and aim. Sankardev received the complete text of the tenth book of the Bhagavata Purana from Jagadish Mishra of Puri at this time, and Sankardev began to recite it to his disciples in a prayer building (temple) he had built himself. He organised religious gatherings, discussions, and group prayers at this place of worship. That design of prayer building, which was constructed in practically all communities, became known as *Namghar*.

Sankardev's literary contributions:

To spread the ideals of harmony and amity among communities, his philosophy combined literature, language, music, performing arts, community centers, sculpture, culture, and ethics. The contemporary Assamese culture, tongue, and philosophy were greatly influenced by this in the future. A thriving literary movement known as Bhakti emerged in the Sankardev Neo-Vaishnavite movement. His literary work improved Assamese literature and art. His works are very diverse, with some written in Assamese, Assamese Brajavali, and Sanskrit. The varied works include lengthy narratives, doctrinal treatises, songs and lyrics, prose, verse, and poetical prose; translations or adaptations; compilations from various texts; and lyrical effusions. His most famous works, the Bhagavata Purana, Bhagvata Gita, and PadmaPurana, were all written in manuscript form on locally produced Sancipat made from Sanci tree bark. Sankardev's creative excellence can be witnessed at the beginning of his formal schooling, when, at the age of twelve, he was accepted into a tol (school) under the tutelage of a renowned Brahman scholar named Mahendra Kandali. At the very beginning of his education, he composed a hymn "karatala kamala, kamala-dala-nayana" known as "Komal Geet," a gentle song in which only the vowel "a" is used.

Sankardev utilized the Brajavali language, which was a unique fusion of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi, and other elements, in both his poetry and the performing arts. Sankardev's *Bhakti-Rantnakara* was the only one of the thirty works to be written in Sanskrit, while the others were written in Assamese to avoid inter-tribal conflict caused by the Sanskrit language. He incorporated regional expressions and a few Tai terms into his compositions, which were written in Assamese, a language that was descended from Sanskrit. Most of

the literary works of Sankardev was to purify religion and society, which was in dire straits. “He takes the literary style from his predecessor Madhava Kandali, but he renovated the style in such way that he has been capable of establishing a new era of Assamese literature” (Baruah, 32). For Sankardev, poetry was designed to uplift the ignorant and innocent one rather than just to amuse them. It was also supposed to inspire and awaken a new way of thinking. For this reason, Sankardev embraced several literary genres that were appropriate for members of various social classes, using non-dualistic thought as a potent medium for religious and spiritual education. He saw that literary works, no matter how full of humanistic, democratic, and philosophical concepts they may be, are useless if they are not of high aesthetic calibre.

Based on the extensive description provided in his biographies, the literary compositions of Sankardev can be categorised as such:

Kirtana (Prayer): Kirtana Ghosa and Gunamala

Kabya (Poetical Works): Harichandra Upakhyana, Rukmini Haran, Ajamil Upakhyana, Amrit Manthan, Bali Chalan, Kurukshetra Yatra, Gopi-Uddhabh Sambada, Kamajay(Raasakridya), Krishna Prayan Pandav Nirmaan, Rukimini Haran Kabya.

Bhaktitvatva Grantha (The book of theological fact): Bhakti Pradip, Bhakti Ratnakar,(written in Sanskrit) Nimi Nava Siddha Sangbad, Anadi Patan.

Angkiya Nat (One Act Play): 1.Patni Prasad, 2.Kaliya Daman, 3.Keli Gopal, 4.Rukmini Haran, 5.Parijat Haran, 6.Ram Vijay

Anubadmula Grantha (Translated Books): BhagawatPuraan, of which Dasam skanda is the notable one, Ramayana (Uttara kanda)

Giti-Sahitya (Hymn literature): 1.Bargeet, 2.Bhatima, 3.Totaya

Sankardev’s first work was the *Harichandra-upakhyana* which was written when he was a student and at the Bhuyan territory. It was based on the Markendeya-purana. Maheswar Neog stated that, “The four corner-posts of Bhakti are the four cardinal principles of Assam Vaishnavism- Naam, Deva, Guru, and Bhakata. Sankara adapts the story from Chapters VII and VIII of the Markandeya-purana and gives the work its present shape with twists to conform to the principle of Bhakti.” (Neog, Sankardev 162) At this stage he also composed *Bhakti-Pradipa*, *Rukmini-Harana-Kavya*, Bargeets, the first group of Bhagvata and more importantly the Kirtana-Ghosa’s early part.

The Kirtana-Ghosa, a well-known composition of the Neo-vaishnavite order and exactly as a first step for spreading his beliefs, is Sankardev's most significant creation. For the purpose of singing Kirtana, or group prayers, it was a gigantic undertaking. The Kirtana Ghosa contains 2264 verses in 189 kirtanas. But it was not that easy task to compile the Kirtana-Ghosa which was wrote in different phases. As Dayananda Pathak, in his article at 'Sankarjyoti' on Lakshminath Bezboroah says that, Sankardev could not integrate all the compositions into a single whole. It was a disjointed composition. Being aware of the nature of the work, the saint advised Madhavadev to integrate the compositions in the form of a single collection, which Ramcharan Thakur, nephew of Madhavdev collected all the verse composition lay across at different location and handed over that to Madhavdev and later the combination of all the composition are called as Kirtana-Ghosa. (Pathak, 633). But according to Shivnath Barman, the nephew of Madhavdev Ramcharan Thakur collaborated all the verses and named it as Kirtana-Ghosa (Barman, 205)

Since Kirtana-Ghosa was so well-liked, both men and women recited it every day during the prayers at the *Namghars*, where *Naam-prashanga* (prayer chanting) takes place. Pathak is the primary reader or the leader of the prayer house. He reads the verses twice, and the assembly responds by singing and clapping hands all together till the kirtana is finished. Remembering that, even illiterate people are able to memorise the entire verse. In every household of Assamese community, the Kirtan-Ghosa is placed in special place called *thapona* (an elevated place or structure). "His Kirtana-Ghosa can stand equal to Guru-Granth-Sahib or Ramcharita Manas". (Baruah 31)

During the period of great unrest and obstruction which Sankardev had to face in his Vaisnavite Movement at the Ahom Kingdom, he still concentrated in his literary activities. He included *Pasanda Mardana*, *Sisulila* of Krishna's early life, *Rasa-krida*, *Namapardha* and other sections in Kirtana Ghosha and the *Patni-Prasada* Ankiya Naat.

Sankardev created two brand-new literary genres: Bargeets and Ankiya Naat. "The Bar-gitas, composed in the artificial Brajavali idiom were put to writing at different periods of his life in various circumstances". (Goswami 64) He created 240 bargeets in total, but only 34 are still in use because the others are on fire. His bargeets were written in Brajavali. While Madhavdev composed 157 Bargeets and all those Bargeets were performed before and after the praryer services. "Bargitas are a type of classical music composition and has two distinct parts: the *dhruva* or refrain (comparable to the *sthayi* or *asthayi* of North India and *Pallavi* of South Indian Music) and the *pada*, consisting of several verses with the

name of the author in the final one and name of raga attached at the top". (Neog, Great Integrator 91)

Sankardev also created the songs Bhatima and Totaya. He was the first person to write prose, a drama, and present a play in the modern Indian language. It was unquestionably a literary revolution that Sankardev was able to start in Assamese literature. Sankardev wrote six plays, with *Chinha Yatra* being the first play to be performed in any contemporary Indian language. The Ankiya Natas or the Bhaona are the titles of his plays. With such Ankiya Nata, he interacted with and attracted his followers. There are seven plays that Sankardev is thought to have written, however *Kamsa-vadha* is no longer available (Goswami, 2007). The six are *Patni-Prasada*, *Kaliya-Daman*, *Keli-Gopala*, *Rukmini-Harana*, *Parijata-Haran* and *Rama-Vijaya* which was his last, composed in 1568 A.D. (Goswami, 2007).

Similar to the Ahom priests who were jealous and concerned about Sankardev's Neo-vaishnavite movement and misled the monarchy, the Brahmanas did the same thing to the Koch kingdom while he was in Barpeta. They deceived the Koch King Naranarayan by indoctrinating Sankardev's Naam-Dharma into his ears. Sankardev was summoned to the Koch King's court, but when Sankardev recited his Sanskrit hymn in totaya and two Rajabhatima in praise of the king, Naranarayana was so impressed with Sankardev that he honoured him instead. Later at the desire of King Naranarayana, Sankardev composed the *Gunamala* and his last dramatic work, *Rama-vijaya* at the request of Chilarai, the commander-in-chief of Naranarayana. "Chilaraya, however, built him a small Satttra near the capital, which later became known as Bhela or Bheladanga-Satra." (Neog, Great Age 125) During this final period of the saint under Koch Kingdom, he also composed other notable works like the second group of Bhagvata, Kirtana Ghosa, Uttara kanda Ramayana, Gunamala. Gunamala is an extraordinary example of Sankardev's acquisition of knowledge and descriptive talent. Gunamala was authored in a single night at the request of King Naranarayana of Koch Kingdom's court along with it several Bargeets, Totaya, Bhatima and some Ankiya Naat namely *Kalia-Damana*, *Keli-Gopala*, *Rukmini -Harana*, *Parijat-Harana* and others.

His translation of the Bhagavata Purana into Assamese verse, which also marks the start of a new literary movement in the history of Assamese literature, is unquestionably his most important work. The writings of Sankardev and Madhavadev were preserved for many years by organizations and individuals, and the text of the manuscripts was passed down from scribe to scribe until the modern era when some individuals attempted to

publish printed editions of these writings. After comparing manuscripts and recensions stored at various traditional institutions and research institutions, attempts were made to publish critical editions in the 20th century.

One of the most renowned preceptors of *Ekasarana Dharma* is Madhabadev (1489– 1596). He is the second notable author in Assamese literature after Sankardev. Because of these two historical figures, Sankardev and Madhabadev, Assam is referred to as the state of *Ekasarana Dharma*. Madhabadev significantly aided in the growth of his Guru Sankardev's legacy of enlightening the populace at the time. Madhabadev's style has a similar smooth flow to his master's and is just as expressive and alluring. The modern dramas that Madhabadev contributed too are also important works for that era's Assamese literature. He is best known for his hymn collection, "Naam Ghosha." This provided Assamese literature with a significant boost. The Bargeet, which was written by both Sankardev and Madhabadev, is referred to as the Assamese soul song. Following Sankardev, the great Neo-Vaishnavite reformer Madhabadev dedicated most of his valuable time to advancing the Vaishnava literary doctrines.

His cultivation of Vaishnava literature through his important works is comparable to rebirth and transformation from darkness into light over the past six centuries. This literary analysis of Madhabadev's works, which have a prominent position in Assamese literature, is philosophical in nature. The goal of this study is to examine Madhabadev's philosophical contribution to Assamese society's literary tradition. Sankardev created a substantial amount of work which quickened the speed of the literary Renaissance while also bringing a fresh and complete perspective on life. However, it was Sankardev who opened up the floodgates and inspired others, such as Madhavadev and other contemporary, to continue where he left off.

Madhavdev filled the gap and some of the incomplete work left by Sankardev, which includes *Janma Rahashya*, *Ramayana Adikanda*, *Goborddhana Yatra*, *Bargeets*, *Bhakti Ratnavali*, *Nama Mallika*, *Narshimha Yatra*, *Jhumura*, *Rama Yatra*, *Rajasuya* and many more.

Sankardev's literary contribution is best explained by Dimbeswar Neog, where he mentioned "Over and above his contribution to Indian philosophy and literature in general, his making of first prose and first drama in a modern Indian language with the invention of the first stage long before it was done even in England, his songs in general and Bargitas in particular, are really a contribution to Indian music of modern times, hardly paralleled by other Vaishnavite singers of India." (D. Neog, 21)

Sankardev's *Satra* Culture:

Sankardev formed the basis for the growth of a culture and a literature, both rich and varied (Neog, Great Integrator 14). The religious and cultural life of Assam was forever changed by Sankardev. He brought together many castes and groups of people into a unified cultural unit through his teachings. Even in the most isolated villages, he founded monasteries to spread Bhakti among the common people. The Assamese national life was being reformatted at the time this movement was established in Assam under the leadership of Sankardev. It was not just a movement for religious reform. For the human imagination, the sky was the limit. It was challenging to create a cohesive vast society without a suitable shared faith or philosophy. Due to the discord between the numerous ethnic populations, including the Koches, Kasharis, Chutias, and Ahoms, the social and political spheres were in disorder. At this point in the history of the country, Sankardev chose the proper course by subduing Assamese society. Along with establishing the groundwork for an organised and unique form of Assamese culture and literature, he gave the Assamese language a new form and richness. "Assamese as a community which was till then a mere geographical expression was endowed with a distinct identity who knit together the diverse and at times warring clans and communities into a composite whole" (Mahanta, 374) With the arrival of Sankardev, the entire, undivided Assam marks the beginning of an Assamese community that is newly motivated and united.

***Satras* and *Naamghar*:**

The greatest cultural contribution of Sankardev was his *Satra* and *Namghar*. After coming back from his first pilgrimage, Sankardev started to mobilise the common people and decided to establish *Satra* and *Namghar* to propagate his Eka-sarana-naam-dharma. At this instance a Tirhut Brahman, Jagadish Mishra of Puri presented the full text of the tenth book of Bhagavata-Purana to Sankardev which he started to narrate to his followers in a prayer house(temple) built by Sankardev himself. At this prayer house he held religious meetings, discussion, and congregational prayers. That concept of prayer house which were built in almost all villages are later popularly known as *Namghar*. To construct a new democratic social order, he established *Namghar* as the focal point for the religious and cultural activities of the state's citizens. No matter their caste or faith, all groups of people

were welcomed by *Namghar's* free and open environment. He believed that while everyone is created equal, only those who are skilled enough to do so can lead Naam Prasanna and recite the holy texts. The *Namghar*, one of the most remarkable social institutions of India with the innate fortitude to resist many trying circumstances, is primarily responsible for the orderliness, unity, and integrity that, for the most part, still distinguish Assamese villages. *Namghars* have been instrumental in eradicating the severe caste system and thereby unite all of humanity. Sankardev a master organizer, was the greatest in reshaping and solidifying the social fabric of Assamese society in addition to his *Naamdharma* preaching of the Bhakti cult philosophy. Sankardev was a superb benefactor. In his writings, he spoke to all of mankind, not only those who lived in Assam or even Bharat Varsha. In the current Nagaon district, in Bordowa, Sankardev built the first prayer house. He built *Satras* later on during his travels across Assam's eastern region, but in Barpeta District, where he lived for a long time, is where this *Satra* culture really took off. *Satra* resembles a Buddhist monastery in certain ways or is similar to Matha. A *Satra* includes a place for communal prayer, a hub for literary and cultural activities, and a place where anybody may learn about yoga, dance, music, and other forms of expression as well as religious texts. The *Satradhikar*, who serves as the *Satra's* chief, is chosen democratically and without regard to caste in the Barpeta *Satra*. *Namghar* or the *Kirtana-ghar* (prayer house) is an integral part of *Satra*. The prayer house located in the *Satra* is called as *Kirtana-ghar*, while a *Namghar* is a prayer house located in the villages of Assam. *Namghar* have a dominant role in the life and living of the people. *Namghar* is a public institution which is attached to the religious, cultural, and intellectual activities of the people in general. There are some of the devotional practices and ceremonies which are still practised as advised by Sankardev in the *Satras*. The first important requirement to be a Vaishnavite is the 'Sarana', which is the ordination or initiation, given by a Guru or *Satradhikar*. The *Satra* ceremonies include the prayer services which are called *prasanga*. The Assamese month of 'Bhadra' is considered as very auspicious, as three major programmes are organised in this month namely Guru Kirttana (death date of Sankardev), kirttana of Madhavdev (death date of Madhavdev) and the Janmastami (birth of lord Krishna). Another important festival which Sankardev introduced in the *Satras* of Assam was the Holi, the spring festival known as DouL Utsav, DouL Yatra or *Phakuwa*. Holi festival is related to Lord Krishna, Sankardev saw the importance of this festival in other parts of India where irrespective of all, and people celebrate it with much pomp and gaiety. So, he

thought it wise to introduce it among his followers to unite together the different caste and community. Holi too had a Pan-India flavour.

Music:

The Bhakti movement fostered the Dhrupad singing tradition and classical music. With the maestro Sankardev guiding the Bhakti movement in Assam as well, his Vaishnavite culture created a vast musical tradition that was unparalleled and carried a rich and extraordinary tone and variety. Bhakti Movement prompted poets all around the nation to write songs that described God, and those words eventually formed prayers to which music was added and which eventually became the primary form of devotion. The Bargitas and the Ankiyagita are two new classical ragas (melody-modes) that Sankardev incorporated into his music. Maheswar Neog elaborated about the style of music which Sankardev adopted and compared with that of other form of music in this way:

“A Bargita may be compared to the Dhrupad songs of North India. Or, it may be compared to *prabandhas* with the four parts of *dhruva*, *antara*, *sancari* and *abhoga*. The bargitas are religious in content and devotional in purpose like the Hindi bhajans of North Indian poets and the Marathi *abhangs* of Tukaram. The dhruva are comparable to the *sthai* or *asthai* of North India and *Pallavi* of the South Indian music. It may also be mentioned that the *Khyal* of the Hindustani music is not seen in the bargitas and it was free from Perso-Arabic influences. The Bargitas of Sankardev were in the Brajavali idioms.” (Neog, Sankardev 278)

The Ankiya-gitas are the songs which were the songs of the dramas. Ankiya-gitas were almost equal in style and musical execution with the bargitas, but Ankiya-gitas were accompanied with rhythmic beats, move over it is never executed without the rhythmic beats. In each Ankiya-gita, the *tala* is always indicated with the ragas. These particular songs are orated generally in the course of dramatic representation which take place in the *Satra*, *Naamghar*, *Than* or in village festivals. As like Bargita, the Ankiya-gitas were also in the Brajavali idioms, but in the creation of Madhavdeva, some of these forms of song are in Assamese dialect. The Kirtana-ghosa, which was open to all demographics, was another type of cultural activity that Sankardev promoted. Even though Bargita and Ankiya-gita are executed by professionals, kirtana-ghosa is something that anyone can take part in and be a part of. A kirtana-ghosa is played to the accompaniment of handclapping, cymbals (*bar-tala*), and drums (*Khol*, *mridanga*, or *nagara*). The Bhatima was another type of music, and its recital calls for a powerful voice. Bhatima were performed without the

use of time beats or a raga. The Deva-Bhatima (a eulogy to God) and the Raja-Bhatima (Panegyrics of the King Naranarayana) are two categories into which Sankardev's bhatima can be divided. Shivrath Barman added another one in this category, which was the Naat-Bhatima (used in Naat). (Barman, 2019) These are chanted alongside the song "totaya" during the sunset prayer in the *Satra* or *Namghar*. The hymn Totaya, written in totoka metre, praises the goodness of Krishna and Vishnu.

Drama:

Sankardev was an excellent communicator, and his dramas, music, and lyrics serve as excellent examples of his abilities. His theatrical performance includes singing, dancing, and acting in addition to dialogue. After *Chinha Yatra*, Sankardev wrote six dramas, all of which portrayed the significance of adhering to the Bhakti path for humanity and the message of Bhakti. His *Chinha Yatra*, which is arguably the first drama performed in any contemporary Indian language, made him a pioneer of the Indian Drama movement. But it must be mentioned here that, *Chinha Yatra* was just a theatrical performance without any written script. Sankardev's creations, the distinctive development of Ankiya Naat (drama) and the introduction of prose as a form of expression, had a significant influence on people outside of Assam as well. Ankiya Naat are the dramas penned by Sankardev himself, whereas Ankiya Bhaona are the performances of such Naats. Even Madhavdeva's drama is not recognised as Ankiya Naat; rather, it is known as Jhumura. Later, "enactment of his followers play composed in that genre are called Bhaona" (Borkakoti, 2020). Sankardev is said to have composed a total of seven drama, of which *Kamsa-badh* is not traced yet. The other six are *Patni-Prasada* (to offer the spouses of brahman priests to the worship of Krishna), *Kaliya-daman* or the *Kali-damana-yatra* (Krishna's overcoming against serpent demon Kaliya), *Keli-Gopal* or the *Rasa-Krida* (Krishna's childhood and rasa kridya with friends), *Rukimini-Harana-Nataka* (Lord Krishna elopement and meeting Kundina princess Rukimin), *Parijat-Harana* (about carrying out the divine flower without Indras knowledge) and his last one *Rama-Vijaya* (lord Rama victory over Ravana) composed lastly at the Koch Kingdom in Koch-Bihar in the year 1568, Saka year 1490. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti added that, according to hagiography of Ramcharan Thakur, Sankardev composed a play named as 'Janma Yatra' but unfortunately it was lost or not available as like *Kamsha-Vadha*. Another play authored by Srimanta Sankardev was *Gopi Uddhava sambada* which was gutted in fire (Borkakoti, 2020). But S.N. Sarma said that "Gopala

Ata left two dramatic compositions, viz, *Gopi-Uddhava-Samvada* and *Janma-Yatra* and several songs for the posterity” (Sarma 85)

Sankardev wrote play not merely to promote his religious ideals, but also as a literary vehicle through which he could reach out to the common people and picture the story. Sankardev's first composed drama *Patni Prasada*, which was influenced by the Sri Mad Bhagavata, tells the tale of the Krishna spirituality and also about the Brahmins who only value sacrifices and ceremonies. The Bhagavata Purana serves as the source for the theme of Sankara Deva's drama *Patni Prasada*. Even though the Brahmana women were forbidden from praying to Krishna, their bhakti and love to him could not be controlled even by their husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons. (Sarma Doloi, 1998) Sankardev attempted to convey the worth of women who had self-esteem, self-respect, and self-pride for the first time in his *Patni-Prasada*.

Rukimini Haran was created by combining Bhagawat and *Haribangsha Akhyan*, where Sankardev gave the character various nicknames that weren't included in the original works. This Naat is not about the romance between Rukmini and Krishna; instead, it showed a crisis that was faced from the other side and ending with denouement (Sarma Daloi, 1998). As Rukimini begged Krishna to forgive her brother Rukmi, Sankardev is attempting to convey the love and affection of brotherhood in this passage. The fact that Krishna didn't killed Rukmi further demonstrates his regard for spouses. The richness of Assamese social, cultural, and religious tradition is depicted in various story points of the play, such as Rukimini's dress, the marriage ritual, and the depiction of Kundilnagar were presented in the play. Sankardev did not write the Ankiya Naat in Assamese or Sanskrit. In it, he spoke in the bizarre Assamese, Maithili, Hindi, and other infused Brajavali language. Maheswar Neog views that may be Sankardev made an attempt to create a common language for all outside Assam, by which everyone can understand the language of the play. “There was spontaneous growth of numerous vernacular plays and theatres all over India. Ramlila and Raslila in Northern India, Katakali, Yaksagana and Bhagvata-mela, all in South, Bhaona in Assam, etc.” (Neog, 218). Sanjiv Kumar Borkakati in this view also tries to establish a notable point of Sankardev’s works which had a Pan-India impact. The social and cultural life of Bengal is highly indebted to Srimanta Sankardev. The Yatra traditions of plays were launched in Bengal in imitation of the Ankiya plays of Srimanta Sankardev, who was the first playwright in all modern Indian languages. This Yatra plays kept Bengal the cultural sphere vibrant in entire Bengal from sixteenth century to

nineteenth century...and this period came to be known as *Kaliya damana* Yatra era in Bengal.” (Borkakoti 262)

Through the AnkiyaNaat, Bhaona and popular songs, Sankardev served the dual purpose of entertainment and teaching the common people. He also taught the art of making Masks of different mythological figure, the drums, the make-up cosmetics, artificial hairs and beards and other equipment which are required in development of theatrical performances. Moreover, it opened the door for others a means of livelihood and patronised the handicraft skill of Art. By it he tried to integrate the common people baring caste, community, and creed.

Classical Dance Form:

The *Satriya Nritya* or Nach is the popular name for the Sankardev School of dance. The numerous *Satras*, who served as the primary carriers of this art, are credited with developing the dance, which is associated to being performed in the *Satra*, *Namghar*, or Than. The Vaishnavite movement, founded by Sankardev, has a rich tradition of traditional Indian dance. His dance style includes a variety of *hastas* (hand motions), refined choreography, unique attire, and *mukhas* (masks). *Raga*, *Taal* (cymbals), songs, and khol (a mridanga) make up the music. A brand-new style of classical dance known as *Satriya Nritya* or *Sankari Nritya* was inspired by Sankardev's self-composed Ankiya Natas. This dancing style is supported by music and raga, and it is performed as a form of devotion to Lord Krishna. Prior to performing this dance, one must practise and exercise it in the form of *Mati akhora*, a type of yogasana that serves as the basis for teaching the dance. There are also certain indigenous elements of the Bodo and Mising dance are included, which give it an indigenous feel and allow for the blending of many cultures. *Satriya Nritya* is included among the eight Indian Classical Dance form.

Questions often arise, whether there was no music and song prior to the advent of Sankardev, and from where Sankardev got the unique idea of integrating the diverse community through the medium of culture. First of all, Sankardev belongs to that family which had the incarnation of heavenly musician. Secondly, Sankardev himself had the practical knowledge of dance, drama and music. Thirdly, when he was in his school days, he almost studied all the ancient texts including the Natya-Sastra under his teacher Mahendra Kandali and got the basic knowledge of the Indian classical music, dance and drama. Further, he had the opportunity of witnessing various Indian cultural activities

during his pilgrimage, and it gave him a first-hand experience of it, which helped him in his own creation with new innovation and new form of songs, music and drama.

Painting:

During the Bhakti Movement, among many forms of Vaishnavite renaissance, the art form of painting was highlighted to a great extent in India. Most of the Vaishnava text of the great personalities including Tulsidas, Jayadev and others were illuminated with the artistic hands of painters. The application of this form of art also got its place in Assam Vaishnavism by illuminating the holy books in that form. “Sankardev is also believed to have been a painter. On one occasion he is said to have painted on tulapat or ginned cotton paper scenes of ‘seven Vaikunthas’. On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant and pasted it on a wooden bookcase to be presented to his royal patron Naranarayana.” (Neog, 152)

The greatest example of Sankardev’s creativity is the Vrindabani Vastra, a wonder textile, woven and supervised by Sankardev at the Tatnikuchi village of Barpeta, in which the divine of Lord Krishna were depicted. In the Vrindabani Bastra, the length was 120 cubit and the breadth was 60 cubit. Here cubit means an ancient measure of length of a forearm. Presently the whole wonder piece is not there, as it is scattered into various pieces in some of the European Museum. Moreover, the illustration of a copy of the tenth skanda of the Bhagavata-purana are found in the Bali-*Satra* of Bardowa. Maheswar Neog added that, “The technique and finish of the work exhibit strong all-India affiliations, although here and there local conventions are naturally to be expected” (Neog152)

Food & Dress:

Sankardev didn’t mention any food habits in his *Satra* Culture, but some *charitaputhis* (biographies) mentions about some food habits. Generally, food restrictions were not specified explicitly in *Satra* culture. However, dietary habits range from one *Satra* to the next. There were various restrictions for celibate *Bhakats*, although there were some relaxations for initiated devotees. Even fish is permitted to be cooked in some *Satras*, at the Baha of *Satra* (place of habitation). “The *charitaputhis* have given minute details of their lives from which it is known that fish and meat were not considered prohibited things for the Vaishnava” (Sarma, 145)

But in Kirtanghar or Naamghar, where manikut is there, cooked meal are strictly not allowed to be served. After the conclusion of Naam-Prashanga(prayer) devotees were

offered Prasada, which was uncooked one. The Prasada consists of a mixture of gram and sprouts (soaked overnight), less amount of soaked rice and thinly sliced ginger and added salt. Some fruits including coconut, banana and sugarcane are also served with it. The devotee consumes it with the utmost reverence and joy. Sankardev was such a visionary that the prasada served has dual facets. To begin with, the prasada provides all of the vital nutrients that the body needs to stay healthy and energetic. Second, because Prasada is an offering to God that is distributed equally to each devotee, it represents a sense of oneness among all devotees, regardless of differences. Nobody was in any dispute about who offered, who prepared, and who distributed.

There was no dress regulation for Bhakats, although in the early stages, practically all *bhakats* wore plain cotton-made outfits. Women mostly wore silk woven clothing on important occasions. Later, some *Satradhikar* and other nobility began to wear head-dresses (pag) as well as waist coat-like dresses. "In biographies of Sankardev and Madhavdev and other reformers there are frequent references to three pieces of clothes worn by them are- bhuni (dhoti), Pacara (wrapper) and dopati (double folded cloth)" (Sarma, 145)

His concept of Bhakti and Neo-Vaishnavism:

The word "Bhakti" in Sanskrit comes from the root "bhaj," which roughly translates to "love and dedication," which is exactly what devotion is. Bhaji, which means "divide, share, partake, participate, or belong to," is the root from which the Sanskrit word "bhakti" is derived. Another definition of the word is "attachment, devotion to, fondness for, homage, faith or love, worship, piety to something as a spiritual, religious principle or means of salvation" (McCray, 2022). In the Shrimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, "Nine forms of Devotion" (Navdha Bhakti) are described that one can practise to unite with divine.

śravaṇaṁ kīrtanaṁ viṣṇoḥ smaraṇaṁ pāda-sevanam,
 arcanaṁ vandanāṁ dāsyāṁ sakhyam ātma-nivedanam,
 iti pumsārpitā viṣṇau bhaktiś cen nava-lakṣaṇā,
 kriyeta bhagavaty addhā tan manye 'dhītam uttamam

(Srimad Bhagwat 7.5.23–24)

The nine types of devotion highlighted in the verse are as follows about the divine: Shraavan (listening about the divine), Kirtan (devotional chanting), Smaran (recollecting

the divine), Pada-Sevana (dedicated at the feet of lord), Archana (adoration of the divine), //Vandana (worshipping by salutation and bowing down), Dasya (servitude the almighty), Sakhya (Making friends with the almighty) and Atma Nivedan (self-surrender to Lord). Sankardev also made reference to these nine types of devotion in Kirtanghosa, emphasising Shravana and Kirtana in his bhakti philosophy. Out of it, Sankardev propagated only two Shravana and Kirtana as chanting Hari's name is an essential aspect of Vaisnavism and is embraced by all Vaishnava saints in India. Here no offering is required including strict customs and rites. The holy 'nama' is recognised as a strong vehicle for spiritual realisation through hearing (sravana) and chanting (kirtana).

In verse 6.23, the third and final epilogue stanza of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, the word Bhakti is used as follows, according to the proverb, "He who has the highest Bhakti (love, devotion) to Deva (God), just as his Deva, so for his Guru (teacher), To him who is high-minded, these teachings will be illuminating" (McCroy, 2022). With a straightforward devotion of finding refuge in Lord Krishna, Sankardev explained the path to the divine, for this he asked his disciple to identify the four fundamental principles. He communicated the "*Cari Bastu*," or four spiritual characteristics of Naam, Deva, Guru, and Bhakat, throughout the induction procedure. Naam is taking the holy name of divine God, Deva Vishnu-Krishna, the only shelter of the *jivas*, Guru is the spiritual guide who steers the initiate's uncertain steps towards Lord, and Bhakat is the close-knit community in which to seek out the Lord of Love. (Neog, 2011). Sankardev described the first, second, and fourth of these, while Madhavdev introduced the third while accepting Sankardev as the guru for himself and for everyone else who adopted his faith at Belaguri. The four principles are unveiled, and their significance is described at the time of initiation (sarana) (McCray, 2022). If we look at the correct order of the caribastu, the four principles, which Keshavananda Dev Goswami makes an order of the system where he placed Guru in the first order followed by Deva, Naam and Bhakat. Moreover, Sankardev himself in his composition 'Bhakti Ratnakara' mentions that *Guru seva vine and yateka upaya, durjana manaka ara jinanan najaya*, which means that the unconquerable mind cannot be controlled in any other way than by serving for the guru. (Goswami, 2007, 163).

Based on a corpus of Vaishnavite texts, Sankardev Vaishnavism attempts to restore the core idea of true Vaishnavism in a particular way. Despite being a part of the pan-Indian traditions, his Vaishnavism does have certain modern components. He lived in an era when ritualism predominated, with ultra-religious animism and occult practice like tantrism interfering to distort religion with superstitious practises and superfluous ceremonies. Since

an impersonal Brahman cannot arouse religious feelings, he portrayed a personal god in order to demonstrate the right path and avoid all false traditions. While Brahman can satisfy spiritual desires, it cannot satisfy religious or heavenly desires. His Vaishnavism thus emphasises a close bond with God through devotion. Because of this, he spread Bhagavata culture and taught the populace about the contents of the *Dasham Skanda*, or 10th Canto, of the Bhagavata Purana, which tells the tale of Hari or Krishna, the unique deity recognised by this purana. This canto is the best in the entire book, making it the holiest and most revered teaching of Vaishnavism, which is followed by all without question. The *Bhagavata* may have been given such a high status in Assamese Vaishnavism, perhaps nowhere else in India. Sankardev's admiration for this book serves as evidence of this. He not only asks others to revere this book, but he reveres it himself. (Baruah, 144). Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy brought in a time of vivid culture that included music, dancing, and visual arts. He had a talent for singing, dancing, and performing plays in addition to writing them. He exploited this to promote Vaishnavism and gave his followers the advice, "*Parara Dharmmaka Nihisib Kdacidit*," to refrain from employing violence against followers of other faiths. The spread of secular concepts by Sankardev had a profound impact on society. In Assam, the Saint Sankardev-led Neo-Vaishnavite School represents a great social and cultural shift that plays a significant part in fostering social harmony among Assamese citizens. Sankardev propagated his beliefs during a time when Assam's society was in upheaval and disarray, ushering in a period of socio-cultural rebirth. Neo-Vaishnavas believe that understanding and actions (karma) can bring about restitution, but that only dedication—which is open to people of all social groups and castes—can bring about divine favor. It has been discovered that Saint Sankardev was motivated to create the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam by several socio-cultural elements. When Sankardev was born in Assam in 1449 AD, the region was experiencing socio-political unrest. Girish Barua adds that, with a desire to improve religious reform, Neo-Vaishnavism was introduced to Assam by Sankardev. It contains a message of interfaith harmony, among diverse ethnic groups and varied mode of faiths (Baruah, 148).

The effects of this movement broke through the Assamese society's foundation and cut through caste and tribal lines. The philosophy and concepts of Sankardev gradually assimilated into Assamese culture. As a result, it is essential to comprehend his views and philosophy from a social perspective. Sankardev can be viewed as a notable social reformer as well as a sociologist who worked to break down social barriers and promote wholesome interactions amongst Assamese individuals to broaden the scope of the investigation. He

was a great social reformer who, through his Bhakti philosophy, not only created a society based on morality and self-control but also one that is based on human values and exhibits elevated levels of intergroup harmony. It all started with the intention of advancing the underprivileged classes and easing the strictness of caste distinctions. He holds that none of these qualifications being a Brahmin, a Sage, or knowing all the scriptures are necessary to experience ultimate liberation or the presence of God. As a result, he welcomed followers from all classes and tribes, and his Vaishnava order allowed them to serve as teachers. In this chapter, it is important to emphasize on the political conditions prevailing as Sankardev as a member of a prominent Bhuyan dynasty. B. K. Kakati (1978) accurately notes that the Bara-Bhuyans "upheld a watchful eye on the shattered pieces of the Hindu Kingdom as several guards of the procession having no monarch" while determining the financial and social conditions of the time. Society's continued survival was in danger. In addition, civilization itself was being devoured from the inside without any support from outside forces.

The ancient kingdom had been progressively falling apart politically from the beginning of the 13th century, and other small to medium-sized kingdoms and royal families had come and gone before and even during his reign. The Ahoms', who first arrived in the eastern part of Assam in 1228, was still waging war despite having taken control of a sizable chunk of the Chutiya and Kachari tribal kingdoms. Following a short interval throughout which Hussein Shah, an Afghan from Bengal, headed for twenty years, the mighty Koch kingdom succeeded the Khen family in the Western area. The Chutiyas had a strong empire in the northeast. The Kacharis controlled from Dimapur in the south, and many tribes lived in the hills there without ever acknowledging an outside tyrant. There were the little Bara Bhuyan states in Central Assam. According to B. N. Puri (1968, 6-7), Bhuyans, a class of landowners, are derived from the Kayasthas of Kanauj. In addition, they had engaged in ongoing conflict with the Chutiya tribe to the lonesome remains of the old Hindu Kingdom of Kamarupa remain under their control. The country's easternmost part was governed by the Chutiyas, while the Kacharis oversaw the southeast. Some small chiefs known as Bhuyans controlled the territories west of the Chutiyas and south of the Kacharis. The Kingdom of Kamata, which eventually became known as Cooch Behar and was ruled by the Koch monarchs, was on the far western horizon. The Ahoms controlled the remaining portions of the Brahmaputra Valley. Many difficulties plagued Srimanta Sankardev's modern society, including. Illiteracy, religious turmoil, and the practice of social evils, among others. As a result, competing political forces attempted to drive the

Assamese people apart. With an all-encompassing faith and a shared national tongue, Sankardev emerged as a unifying force in this period and paved the way for Assam's cultural, spiritual, and linguistic development. Although largely a religious movement, the new faith was enormously pushed by the patronage of some of these states' rulers, and this in turn gave rise to a variety of artistic and literary forms. Since it discussed its principles of the rule of law, humanity, capital, and brotherhood and was unique and creative, it holds a significant position within the various Bhakti rituals in India. The Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy was begun in Assam in the initial quarter of the sixteenth century with Saint Sankardev, and it achieved its pinnacle in the final years of the seventeenth century. It all is happening intending to advance those in lower socioeconomic sections and ease the strictness of class boundaries. By accepting his disciples regardless of their caste, tribe, class, or religion, Sankardev launched the primary endeavour to assimilate the downtrodden groups, and tribes into the Vaishnavite fold. This religion can be referred to as the religion of the masses because it is the most liberal, tolerant, straightforward, and uncomplicated approach to reaching God. Sankardev maintained his common man status by keeping his neo-Vaishnava faith independent of the era's politics. He even made it a rule that he would never serve as a guru to a king. It has been discovered that even though Maharaja Nara Narayana of Koch Bihar gave Sankardev support during this time, he steadfastly declined to recognize the ruler as his student. Because having ego prevents a ruler from being authentic in his devotion. He will have to compromise with the fundamental tenet of *Eka Sarana* in a kingdom with a diverse people because he must patronise all the sects (Borkakati, 2016).

Sankardev, therefore, supported a secular political philosophy where class, position, caste, and racial distinctions were not understood in this religion. He also carried the flag of rebellion against elaborate ceremonies, flimsy religious procedures, and the hegemony of the priestly class. He disseminated a novel idea: that the whole populace, irrespective of class, caste, race, etc., might likewise achieve religious greatness during the straightforward dedication to and confidence in one all-powerful God. As a result, Srimanta Sankardev embraced followers from all classes and tribes, and his Vaishnava order allowed them to serve as teachers as well. The Neo-Vaishnavism religion evolved a democratic perspective that penetrates all of Assam's teachings and practices. The Neo Vaishnavism philosophy promoted global love as a means of enlightening the human consciousness. In Assamese villages, members of the so-called untouchable caste or lower caste interacted with members of the higher castes and could participate in all village activities. Neo-

Vaishnavism is a revolutionary movement in Assam since it influences not just religious beliefs but also how Assamese culture is alive. It encompassed Assam humanity's cultural, social, and religious realms. But he employed "Brajavali," a synthetic mashup of Braj and Assamese, for dramatic purposes in both his songs and dramas. It should be noted that Srimanta Sankardev once again makes significant contributions to language, culture, art, and literature for all with the new Cultural Revolution he brought about. In their famous writings "KirtanGhosa" and "Nama Ghosa," respectively, Sankardev and Madhavdev elaborated on the core doctrines and beliefs of Neo Vaishnavism.

Sankardev's Reformation:

Sankardev is frequently regarded as Assam's most significant social revolutionary reformer. With twisted religious ideas, ongoing social evil practices, and religious beliefs, the dominant culture was in a complete state of disarray. Assam was fortunate enough that Sankardev emerged at this important moment and not only changed the society as well as integrated it. This was necessary in order to free the community of these ills and practises. He established a basis for social change, cultural harmony, and enduring spiritual attachment to Neo-Vaishnavism with the message of Vaishnavism philosophy and the phrase Ek Sarana Naam Dharma (devotion to a singular deity). Bhakti is accessible to anyone, regardless of caste. It places the Brahman on the same religious standing as the outcast, for which he said-

Chandala paryanta kari hari-bhakti-adhikari

(Everyone down to the Chandala has the right to love of Hari). One need not have to be a scholar in the esteemed scriptures of offer his bhakti to the Supreme Being." (Neog, 117).

With a society split along the lines of ethnicity, language, culture, casteism, upper and lower social classes, geographical differences, varied political conditions, depressing political conditions, and other issues prevailing in the diverse society, it was difficult for saints like Sankardev and Madhavdev to reform society and unite the people on a cultural level. It was also difficult for Sankardev to transform society due to the political climate. The Ahoms, who formerly had little knowledge of Hindu rites and traditions, governed Assam at that time. Later, when Hinduism began to have an impact on the Ahom Royal House, supremacy of the Brahmans was at its peak. Due to their dominance of the political,

social, and economic discourse of the period, Brahmanical feudalists nearly brought the society to its collapse. Additionally, Sankardev was extremely concerned about Shaktism and Tantrism, which promotes the sacrifice of humans and animals. The political rights of the lower castes were curtailed, as were their freedoms in the social, cultural, and religious spheres. Shivnath Barman in his *Srimanta Sankardev: Kriti aru Krititva* stated that, “He knew that high-caste Hindus would not easily surrender the privileges they enjoy and so there was little hope for his religion to be popular with them, He thus pinned his faith more on the so called low-caste people.” (90)

As the low caste were deprived of their social and religious status, so Sankardev tried to unite those section of people in the Bhakti Marg and realise God by just *sravana* (listen) and *Kirtana* (Chanting God name). Barman further cleared that Sankardev never attempted to abolish the caste system entirely, despite his affection towards the so-called low caste. He only made an effort to weaken its hold on the populace. Despite his opposition to Brahminic practises, he frequently showed a respectful attitude towards Brahmins in the works he wrote. Sankardev, who was Mahatma Gandhi's forerunner and who lived in Assam five hundred years before him, referred to the untouchable Sudras as Harijans (Son of God), much as Mahatma Gandhi did.

So, it was an uphill task for Sankardev to popularise his movement among the common people. Though he translated the sacred books in common language which could be understood by all, but it didn't prove to be only way by which the common people of the deprived society be united. To march a society there need to be more emphasis and knowing this, Sankardev went ahead by writings songs, plays which were known as Bargeet and *Ankiya Bhaona*. Moreover, he composed two of his great creations the *Kirtan Ghosa* and the *Gunamala*. By combining literature, language, music, theatre, community centres, sculpture, culture, and ethics, Sankardev attempted to spread the ideals of harmony, amity between communities, and a way of life among the common people, which later played a crucial role in forming the modern Assamese language, culture, and philosophy.

Sankardev desired a society free from violence, hatred, and inequity as a means of uplift. He was aware that non-violence, harmony, kindness, faithfulness, and affection would rule society after people attained spiritual consciousness and were well-cultured. To achieve this among the regular people, he toiled all of his life. Maheswar Neog in this regard added that,

In Sankardev's system, therefore, we find Brahman disciples of Sudra teachers, and even people who are untouchables in other parts of India in the following of

Brahman Mahanta. We also find a Brahman occupying superior ship of a sattra in succession to a Sudra. Nobody, on the other hand, is to be considered as unfit for securing initiation to the faith on caste consideration. (Neog, 135)

The Neo-Vaishnavism religion of Sankardev appealed to the general populace because it was free of casteism, did not grant high castes exclusive control over the rituals, and promoted democratic thought. Through arduous labour, self-sacrifice, and the dissemination of the Bhakti concept, Sankardev was able to defeat animism and successfully reunite the society. Sankardev envisioned an egalitarian society in which people from all walks of life may gather to dine and pray to God together, regardless of caste, tribe, or community. The foundation of an egalitarian community was created when the saint encouraged members of the tribal communities. The Brahmins' power over religion and the caste system, which had severely weakened the social fabric of Hinduism, were contested by him. He rejected institutional injustice by arguing that a person's worth should be determined by their qualities rather than their caste. (Baruah 54).

Sankardev took the lead in the fight against the overbearing and deceptive rituals and formalities that were prevalent in society. Thus, we may conclude that the caste system, which is pervasive in Hindu society, has greatly harmed Indian society. However, Sankardev is solely to thank for Assam's freedom from untouchability and the corrupt caste system. Additionally, Prafulla Pran Mahanta made an important addition,

"The advent of this saint can, therefore, rightly be described as the most significant event in the annals of the whole of undivided Assam as it did the birth of a newly inspired and united Assamese community."(P, 374)

In his Kirtanghosh, Sankardev mentioned about the caste division as a serious social evil. In the chapter of *Sri Krishnar Baikuntha Prayan* of Kirtan Ghosha, Sankardev says that –

*Kukura candela garddavarō atmarama/
Janiya savako pari Kariba pranama*/(4/40)

Consequently, it follows that the souls of dogs, candalas (untouchable), and asses are actually those of God, and as such, they should be treated with reverence. Because God created humans as well as animals, we should treat them both with dignity and on an equal level. Not just among humans, but also among animals, distinction is detrimental to social integration.

In Kirtanghosh, again Sankardev mentioned about the casteism and untouchability that-

*Nahi bhakatita jati-ajati vichar/
Krisnata bhakti samastara adhikara/(5/61)*

This couplet emphasises the universality of devotion to Lord Krishna, stressing that caste or creed should not be used to determine who has the right to devote themselves to Krishna. The attitude here is that Krishna's love and devotion are available to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic background or identity. Sankardev rejected untouchability and revealed its emptiness. He condemned prejudice based on caste, creed, and rank. Everyone is allowed to recite the Harinama (prayer) in bhakti. Furthermore, according to Sankardev, even a *Candala* from a low caste who worships Hari (God) every day and considers him to be God in body, mind, soul, and word is superior to a Brahmana. Keshavananda Deva Goswami in this regard added that, “In the *Harichandraupakhyana* the Guru declares that there is no difference between God and his devotees and even a low-born *Candala* is purified by listening to and chanting His name.

*Visnu vaisnavara katha duyoy samatula
Sravana kirttane kare papara nirmula
Candela paryante kare savake pavitra.(Goswami 53)*

Discourses on Vaisnavas and Visnu have equal merit; if you recite them or listen to them, all faults are wiped off. Even the outcast *Candala* is sanctified. This verse emphasises the idea that stories about Lord Vishnu and the Vaishnavas are spiritually uplifting and divine in character. Listening to and singing these stories purifies one's heart and soul, much like the purification of all sins. The goes on to say that these spiritual practises have the potential to purify everyone, regardless of their background, including everyone from the highest to the lowest caste.

Sankardev was a social reformer rather than a social revolutionary. He lived in a feudal culture, and religion played a significant role in shaping people's actions in such a society: “Sankardev understood these positive roles of religion and therefore he took religion to be a means for social reform” (Barua, 53). The practise of several harmful rituals, rites, and practises under the guise of religion was prevalent at that time. Due to the degradation of Hinduism, Sankardev rejected aestheticism and polytheism in his Neo-Vaishnavism since he saw them as the fundamental causes of the current state of affairs. Therefore, he supports monotheism as the only belief system that can unite society and

enable it to live simply and healthily. He also advocates for universalism. The Vaishnava Movement of Sankardev and the Renaissance in cultural sphere gradually drew the attention of an increasing number of individuals. But his initiatives to revive both culture and religion were nonetheless in their infancy and hadn't really taken off. During this period of time due to disputes over grazing and farming land, the Bhuyans frequently engaged in conflict alongside the Tibeto-Buman tribe of the Kachari dynasty. When he held the position of Siromoni Bhuyan or the Bhuyan leader earlier, Sankardev showed his aptitude for administration in this situation. "The friction was acute when Sankardev first took over the duties of Siromani Bhuyan and managed to tackle the relations with a great amount of tact and accommodation" (Neog 115).

But later, when Sankardev took off the responsibility himself as Bhuyan Chief, it became impossible for the Bhuyans to reach a settlement with the Kacharis. As a result, the Bhuyans, including Sankardev, were forced to leave their homeland and temporarily reside in a number of locations before settling for a while at Gangmau, which is now Bishwanath on the Northern part of the Brahmaputra. Haricharana, Sankardev's oldest child, was born here. However, the Koches and Daflas could also easily reach this location, so Sankardev and his supporters withdrew eastward in the Ahom region and set up camp at Dhuwahat in Majuli. Wherever he travelled, Sankara always carried out his religious, social and literary duties. He never skipped his daily prayer reciting. At Dhuwahat Belaguri Govinda Atai, a member of the Garo hill tribe, and Ramachandra, a member of the Mishing community, received ordination from the Guru (Sankardev). "Despite such political unrest and turmoil, Sankardev was always engaged in performing his religious and literary activities wherever he went, made many converts and his fame spread wider and wider" (Goswami, 31). Sankardev encountered a wide range of social groups here, representing diverse castes and communities. The biggest result of his eastward trek was when he met Madhavdev, his most beloved pupil and primary apostle, at this Dhuwahat Belaguri. Madhavdev was a devout Sakta, and once, when his mother was ill, he was asked to sacrifice a goat in the name of goddess Durga. He asked his brother-in-law Gayapani, who was later given the name Ramadasa by Sankardev, to provide the goat, but because Gayapani was committed to Bhakti culture and had already started to adhere to Sankardev's faith, he declined to do so. The appropriateness of offering blood sacrifices to gods was a topic of discussion between Madhavdev and Ramadasa.

Ramadasa requested that Madhava and Sankardev have a discussion about it, and as a result, both Sankara and Madhava, two outstanding scholars of opposing religious

cults, expressed their opinions while providing examples drawn from various religious literature. But after hearing Sankardev quote a phrase from the Bhagvata Purana, Madhavdev changed his perspective and acknowledged his ignorance. In his book, Maheswar Neog translated the verse that Sankardev mentioned-

As the branches, leaves, and foliage of tree are nourished by the pouring of water only at the root of the tree, as the limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Acyuta (Neog, 110)

Scholar Madhavdev was deeply moved by this, and he instantly bowed down to Sankardev and acknowledged him as his Guru. The historic gathering, known as "*manikanchana-samyoga*," or the union of gems and gold, occurred in 1522 AD. Later Madhavdev started to devote his time to the services of Sankardev, and by getting Madhavdev, a scholar himself on his side, Sankardev propagated Madhava as his co-worker and associate. Madhavdev became the chief disciple of Sankardev and considered Sankardev as his guru. The Vaishnava order of Sankardev eventually gained vast scope with the arrival of Madhavdev, and the number of its adherents tended to rise day by day. Sankardev believed that Madhavdev's integration marked a turning point in the development of the Bhakti Movement, and that Madhavdev's presence helped Sankardev become a fully realised being. At this time, the Neo-Vaishnavism movement of Sankardev attracted not just regular people but also several notable, learned pandits. This time served as the impetus for Sankardev's Social Reformation movement.

After spending fourteen years in Dhuwahat-Belaguri, many people, including some well-known Brahmanas, joined his cause. However, there were a small number of priestly Brahmanas who were envious of the social reforms Sankardev was bringing about. They disagreed with the democratic interpretation of Sankardev's Bhakti philosophy and informed the then-Ahom king Suhungmung that Sankardev is advocating a corrupt type of religion that is hostile to the Brahmanical order. Sankardev was able to defend his position, and the Brahmanas also acknowledged that the Bhakti Marg Sankardev demonstrated was valid. However, due to their concern for their position of dominance and way of life as well as the emerging acceptance of Neo-Vaishnavism, the Brahmanas continued to be envious of Sankardev. Furthermore, once the Ahom dynasty blamed the Bhuyans for a khedda (elephant catching) incident that occurred at this time, leading to Hari, the son-in-law of Sankardev, being beheaded and Madhavdev being imprisoned for six months. In the

interim, Sankardev learned of the Koch Kingdom's benevolence, and the Bhuyans travelled west and established in Patbaushi, in the modern-day district of Barpeta. This location served as Sankardev's permanent residence for nearly 20 years. A large portion of his pieces of writing were created here.

The second pilgrimage to Puri was undertaken by Sankardev in the year 1550, along with about 120 bhaktas, including Madhavdev. Six months later, the pilgrimage returned to Patbaushi. It is claimed that Sankardev met Kabir, Chaitanya, Ramananda, Harivryasa, and other notable personalities on this pilgrimage, however the veracity of this cannot be verified and historicity is lacking. According to Keshavananda Deva Goswami, it should be regarded as the 'pious fantasy' of some biographers. Sankardev's endeavours were not limited to the religious world. He was a person of excellence and capability in a great many different activities. In one person, he blended the roles of a prophet, philosopher, social reformer, humanist, artist, composer, dramatist, poet, painter, linguist, administrator, architect, dancer, and actor. He made an appeal to every segment of society to eliminate conflicts between various communities and social classes because everyone had the same soul. He argued for social unification and spoke of brotherhood across all cultures. He emphasised social justice and equality. Sankardev conveyed to his disciples the morals and spirituality of the Bhakti in a condensed manner through song, dance, theatre, and literature. To achieve his goals of improving society, eradicating ills, and establishing equality and social justice, Sankardev not only spoke about religion but also started a cultural movement. "Sankardev's religion has made people understand the value of community life and thus they have been made socially conscious" (Baruah 56). One of the key elements in social advancement is social consciousness. The Assamese people who lack literacy have been socialized in this way. They have learned the value of knowing one another and the spirit of cooperation because of this. His religion has helped to foster a culture where the ties of brotherhood, friendship, and unity can flourish. Sankardev had very liberal socio-cultural and religious ideas, which is appropriate to highlight here. No one was ever coerced into accepting his faith or receiving ordination. According to him, when the average person experiences spiritual uplift, the social environment would naturally change, and the societal ills will eventually vanish forever. This change brought about social reform and absorption into the society's disorganized structure. Sankardev's contributions to Assamese literature and culture gave the population of Assam a feeling of cohesion and morality. Thus, it can be said that Sankardev created the framework for the Bhakti message to unite Assamese society and culture. Sankardev was effective in bringing

about social reform, but he was also successful in promoting harmony and integration among Assamese groups of varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In the same way that Jesus Christ and Hazarat Mohammed were forced to endure suffering and give their lives in order to establish the ultimate reality, Sankardev was forced to endure a great deal of suffering at the hands of both the rulers and the ruled in order to restore a civilised and cultured form of society based on the equality theory. Sankardev had to lose his son-in law, Hari, to the Ahom dynasty in addition to being summoned twice by the ruler.

As Prafulla Pran Mahanta in his article published in 'Krishna-Kathamrita' says that, "The advent of this saint can, therefore, rightly be described as the most significant event in the annals of the whole of undivided Assam marking as it did the birth of a newly inspired and united Assamese community." (P, 374) (Krishna katha amrita, SSS).

Religion is seen by Sankardev as a tool for bringing about societal change. There is a genuine desire to better society in every social reformer. With the conviction that the goal should always come first, he makes an effort. To dispel the stigma of untouchability and promote Hinduism in its reformatted form, many prominent men from various parts of India have come out in favor of devotionals. The gurus of this devotional movement in this case were Kabir in Uttar Pradesh, Chaitanyadev in Bengal, and Sankardev in Assam.

Being a reformer of this kind, Sankardev sought the aid of Vaishnavism, where he found a practical and beneficial religious structure. Although the majority of us are unsure if such a method is practical in the current culture, it may have been helpful in a developing feudal society. However, in the following chapter, we will attempt to illustrate how the Bhakti model as promoted by Sankardev is currently being used in Barangajuli *Satra* and how Harekrishna Mahanta promoted societal harmony, unity and solidarity among all tribes and communities. Sankardev, a forerunner to Mahatma Gandhi, had established the Sudras in Assam over 500 years ago as what Mahatma Gandhi regarded as the untouchable Sudras with Harijans (Son of God). Sankardev took the lead in the fight against the overbearing and deceptive rituals and superficial formalities that were prevalent in society. Sankardev's promotion of secular ideas led to a significant social transformation. His pioneering campaign was responsible for preventing casteism and untouchability from reaching the same criminal proportions in Assam as they have in other regions of India to this day. We can therefore conclude that the caste system, which is pervasive in Hindu society, has greatly harmed Indian society and that Assam's freedom from untouchability and the unjust

caste system is solely due to the social reformation of Sankardev. This legacy has been carried forward by Harekrishna Mahanta.