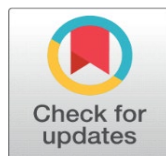


HISTORICAL INSIGHTS ON SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA AND THE NEO-VAISHNAVISM MOVEMENT: SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

Guptajit Pathak ¹✉, Dr. Projit Kumar Palit ²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History Assam University (Central) Silchar-788011, Assam, India

² Research Supervisor, Professor, Department of History Assam University (Central) Silchar-788011, Assam, India



Received 7 June 2023

Accepted 8 July 2023

Published 31 August 2023

Corresponding Author

Guptajit Pathak,
pathakguptajit19@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/granthaalayah.v11.i8.2023.6422](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v11.i8.2023.6422)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The Neo-Vaishnavism (Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma) movement, which was founded by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568 C.E.), is credited with changing the religious, social, and cultural paths of medieval Assam. Through inclusive institutions like Namghars, Sattras, and Bhaona performances, Sankardeva's reformist mission aimed to integrate disparate ethnic communities and spread devotion (bhakti) based on a single, accessible divine principle in the face of caste stratification, communal tensions, and fragmented politics.¹ His movement left lasting effects on identity formation and intercommunal cohesion over the ensuing decades, influencing the Assamese language, arts, social conventions, and political affiliations.

The research conducts a critical historical analysis of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, examining its dual roles as a socio-cultural revolution and a religious reform. In addition to examining how his disciples institutionalized his vision, it places Sankardeva's activities within the political framework of Ahom, Koch, and Baro-Bhuyan power dynamics and evaluates the resulting changes in caste attitudes, gender norms, ritual practices, and literary culture. The study unearths the continuities and disturbances his movement created by combining original chronicles (like Buranjis), hagiographical sources, and existing scholarship. The study contends that Neo-Vaishnavism was a powerful social engineering tool in medieval Assam rather than just a religious doctrine, and that despite changes, its influence can still be seen in Assamese society today.

Keywords: Srimanta Sankardeva, Neo-Vaishnavism, Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma, Satra, Namghar, Medieval Assam, Socio-Cultural Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

In Assam, the 15th and 16th centuries were characterized by religious plurality, shifting alliances, and political contestations. While regional chieftains like the Baro-Bhuyans and more recent polities like the Koch kingdom fought for power, the Ahom kingdom was solidifying its hold on the Brahmaputra valley. In religious life, residual animistic traditions, Tantrism, Shaktism, and traditional Brahmanical

rituals coexisted, occasionally in opposition to one another. The Neo-Vaishnavism or Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma movement in Assam was born out of the reformist fervor and spiritual pilgrimage of Srimanta Sankardeva, a saint-scholar who came into this atmosphere. Sankardeva's goal was to shift Assamese society away from hierarchical hierarchy and toward a common religious center. [Kalita, B.J. \(2016\)](#)

Theologically and architecturally, Sankardeva was innovative. He created Namghars congregational prayer halls, Sattras monastic/seminary institutions, and the musical and theatrical forms of Borgeet, Satriya, and Bhaona as means of spreading religion. These promoted a vernacular literary legacy, spread egalitarian ideals, and incorporated spiritual practice into daily life. The movement spread throughout Assam and the surrounding areas throughout time, frequently blending with regional traditions and political favoritism. [Khataniar \(2022\)](#)

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement did not, however, come without conflicts. It engaged in talks with the local chieftains, royal courts, and Brahmins in particular. In addition to negotiating ritual disagreement, it had to adjust to ethnic diversity in tribal and indigenous societies. Additionally, hierarchies and internal conflicts were established by the movement's institutionalization through Sattras and Mahantas. This essay explores the ways in which Sankardeva's religious reform influenced socio-political and cultural transformation in medieval Assam, highlighting its paradoxes, dynamic development, and lasting influence.

2. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Numerous academics have examined various facets of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and Sankardeva's legacy, such as its artistic traditions, literary output, and the development of Satra institutions. These studies, however, frequently stay fragmented and lack a cohesive framework that places the movement in the larger sociopolitical and economic framework of medieval Assam. Because of this, there is a lack of knowledge about how Sankardeva's reformist concepts interacted with and were influenced by the caste, class, and power systems that were in place at the time.

Furthermore, even though Sankardeva advocated social reform and spiritual equality in his teachings, the movement's institutionalization through Sattras created additional paradoxes and hierarchies. Little is known about the historical breadth and intricacy of this conflict between the movement's initial egalitarian principles and the later-developed structural stratifications. The purpose of this article is to critically analyze how these conflicts have developed and investigate how Sankardeva and his successors managed to reconcile religious reform with sociopolitical reality.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

- 1) Neog, M. (1980), 'Sri Sankardev', Neog frequently serves as a basis for later works; his monograph is used to describe Sankardev's life in detail, to dialogue with his times, to discuss his teachings, travels, disciples, the growth of the Sattra network, and to produce literary and religious works. Numerous fundamental historical truths are established by Neog's scholarship, which is rich in source gathering. Neog's work, however, often lacks critical engagement with contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as postcolonial theory, identity theory, or material culture studies, or with underrepresented communities' tribal viewpoints, women's roles, etc., because it is older and more descriptive.

- 2) Borkakoti, S.K. (2006), 'Srimanta Sankardeva's Distinctive Contribution to Religion and Culture', Borkakoti offers a monograph-style account of Sankardev's theological concepts (devotion, guru, nam, and deva), his religious innovations (Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma), his reforms of ritual practice, and his ethical teachings. The book is frequently consulted in order to comprehend the theological foundation and the process of religious transformation in Assam. One flaw is that it frequently places more emphasis on the theological and ritual aspects than on social struggle and how the movement was entwined with economic realities, political power, and patronage.
- 3) Kalita, B. J. (2016), 'A Historical Study of Srimanta Sankardeva and the Neo-Vaishnava Movement in Assam', Kalita highlights that two fundamental aspects of Sankardeva's approach are universalism and cultural fusion. He contends that Sankardeva's thought fostered a religious perspective that could incorporate Hindu, tribal, and folk beliefs, transcending strict caste, tribal, or ethnic distinctions. This historical viewpoint highlights both the commonalities and regional differences between Sankardeva and larger Bhakti movements throughout India. While universalism is affirmed in Kalita's study, there is a gap in that it does not completely develop the conflicts or constraints that exist in real-world situations, such as within caste/tribe hierarchies or in connection to governmental authority.
- 4) Das, D. & Saikia, C.R. (2020), 'Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism movement in Assam and its Socio-cultural Ramifications', according to Das and Saikia's work, the movement changed popular religion, festivals, common rituals, values, everyday life, and the role of the vernacular. Neo-Vaishnavism, they argue, democratized religious participation (e.g., opening Namghars), strengthened Assamese cultural identity, and reduced dependence on Brahmanical hierarchy and Vedic ritualism. Although their concise treatment is useful as a summary, it falls short in terms of archival depth and monitoring long-term political impacts, including the responses or changes in political power.
- 5) Das, N. (2020), 'A Critical View of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva's Contribution to Assamese Language, Literature, and Culture', Das conducts an analysis of the ways in which Sankardeva's literary contributions such as the production of Kirtan Ghosha, the use of Brajavali, poetry forms, and dramatic works influenced Assamese identity, particularly in terms of language development and cultural self-perception. This essay also looks at how Sankardeva's legacy might have been romanticized or sanitized by later interpretations. It calls into question the extent to which the movement's legacy has been mythologized rather than kept legitimately. However, rather than being backed by in-depth textual or archival evaluation, the "critical perspective" occasionally stays broad.
- 6) Hoque, A. (2020), 'An Overview of the Relationship between Assamese Society and Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva', Hoque places Sankardeva's literary and cultural creations within the moral, educational, and value frameworks of Assamese society. He examines the ongoing influence of the teachings on contemporary identity of Assam and communal life. Although the study is more thematic than

historical-methodological, it aids in comprehending continuity from the past to the present and lacks comparative periodization and extensive historical sources.

- 7) Khataniar, D. (2022), 'Neo-Vaishnavism in Satra Institutions and Assam', Khataniar charts the satras' internal divisions, patronage networks, geographical dispersion, leadership (such as Sattradhikars), and organizational structure. The study demonstrates how the Neo-Vaishnavism movement remained strong and dynamic because satras served as hubs for social welfare, education, and cultural output in addition to being places of worship. This work's empirical data on institutional dynamics is one of its strong points, but its focus is more descriptive than theoretical in terms of how the satras acted as a mediator between local socio-cultural groups and political authority (Koch, Ahom).
- 8) Vijayakumar, B. (2022), 'Neo-Vaishnavism's beginnings and the Contribution of Satra to Assamese Literature and the Arts', Vijayakumar links the emerging Assam's arts of dance, drama (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), music (Borgeet), and literature with the neo-Vaishnavite movement, particularly through its satra network. This essay emphasizes how the movement's social and religious appeal depended heavily on creative advances rather than their being incidental. By creating a "vernacular aesthetic," Sankardeva is able to connect with audiences outside of the elite. One drawback is that while a lot of artistic literature is discussed, less focus is placed on how performative settings, such as village vs court or Satra against Namghar, influenced power dynamics between various social groups.

4. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

One of the most important cultural-religious revolutions in northeastern India is the Neo-Vaishnavism movement, which was started by Sankardeva. It illustrates how devotional religion and social reform came together. Sankardeva's vision was rooted in everyday communal life and integrated language, art, ritual, and social equality. However, despite its significance, there hasn't been any historical-critical synthesis that situates Neo-Vaishnavism within the larger framework of medieval Assam's politics and culture.

The study intends to close knowledge gaps about how a religious movement led to long-lasting changes in Assamese society by placing Sankardeva's movement within political changes like Ahom expansion and Koch patronage, looking at its institutional mechanisms, and analyzing its cultural manifestations. It also looks into whether institutional continuities and power dynamics fully achieved or undermined Sankardeva's idealized egalitarianism.

4.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are-

- 1) To trace the Neo-Vaishnavite movements historical rise in medieval politics under Sankardeva.
- 2) To examine the institutional methods used by Namghar, Sattrra, and Bhaona to disseminate and uphold his teachings.

- 3) To analyze the socio-cultural changes brought about by Neo-Vaishnavism in the areas of language, art forms, gender norms, ritual practices, and caste relations.
- 4) To assess the movement's conflicts, concessions, and legacy, especially how institutionalization changed the movement's initial principles and how its influence endures in contemporary Assamese society.

4.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What aspects of Assam's political, social, and religious landscape supported Sankardeva's reformist efforts?
- 2) In what ways did Namghar, Sattras, and Bhaona serve as social as well as religious institutions?
- 3) How did Neo-Vaishnavism change gender roles, caste attitudes, ceremonial life, language, and art in medieval Assam?
- 4) How much did the movement's institutionalization create inconsistencies or hierarchies, and how has this impacted its historical legacy?

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1) Primary Sources

The historical relevance of Srimanta Sankardeva and the Neo-Vaishnavism movement in influencing the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of medieval Assam is examined in this study using a variety of primary sources. The study centers on Sankardeva's original compositions, including the Kirtan-Ghosa, Ankiya Naat, and Borgeets devotional songs, which demonstrate his literary ingenuity, social reformist beliefs, and theological vision. Additionally, the study makes use of recent records that reveal royal patronage and public reactions to the movement, including land grants, court chronicles, and inscriptions from the Buranjis Ahom. Visits to Sattras will be part of the fieldwork, where oral histories, performance practices, and living traditions will be noted and recorded. Additional oral primary data will be obtained through interviews with Sattradhikars, traditional artists, and local historians in order to comprehend the lived legacy of Sankardeva's reforms.

2) Secondary Sources

In order to frame the historical, cultural, and theoretical aspects of this investigation, secondary materials are crucial. The study engages with the writings of renowned historians like Maheswar Neog, H.K. Barpujari, and Sanjukta Gupta and pulls from academic studies of Neo-Vaishnavism, Assam's history, and Bhakti movements in India. These studies offer interpretations of Sankardeva's movement's religious, social, and political ramifications. Critical viewpoints on topics including caste dynamics, vernacularization, identity formation, and opposition to orthodoxy in medieval Assam can be found in scholarly books, journal articles, PhD dissertations, and cultural histories. Neo-Vaishnavism is also better understood in the context of larger South Asian trends when compared to religious reform movements in other parts of India. When taken as a whole, these secondary sources provide a thorough and critical examination of how Sankardeva's legacy changed Assamese culture and still shapes its cultural identity today.

3) Rationale

An important period of theological and cultural reformation was the Neo-Vaishnavism movement in medieval Assam, which was led by Srimanta Sankardeva. Sankardeva was a visionary saint, poet, and social reformer who promoted a monotheistic Bhakti worldview that opposed Brahmanical orthodoxy, ritualism, and strict caste hierarchies. In addition to making religion more approachable for the general public, he also changed the spiritual landscape of Assam by highlighting devotion (bhakti) to a single, formless God, either Vishnu or Krishna. He promoted a cultural renaissance that brought disparate ethnic groups together under a single religious and cultural identity by using vernacular language in literature, music (Borgeet), theater (Ankiya Naat), and art.

The Neo-Vaishnavism movement had significant socio-political ramifications in addition to its religious significance. It developed into a unifying factor that quietly opposed tyranny based on caste and feudalism, creating the foundation for a more equitable Assamese society. New hubs for community life, education, and the arts were established by the growth of Sattras (monastic institutions), which had an impact on public opinion and governance. The movement sparked a change toward inclusion, moral reform, and cultural consolidation through Sankardeva's legacy, making it a pivotal period in history of Assam.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Patronage and Political Context

The political organization of medieval Assam was defined by overlapping, flexible domains of power. While the Baro-Bhuyan loosely allied chieftainships held sway in many peripheral areas, the Ahom dynasty was consolidating its administrative structures and extending its influence over a variety of ethnic groups in the Brahmaputra valley during the 15th and 16th centuries. At the same time, the Koch kingdom, led by Maharaja Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai, was growing into a significant political force in western Assam and the surrounding areas, frequently challenging Ahom authority. Sankardeva's movement negotiated this changing environment rather than arising in a vacuum. The Koch king Naranarayana and his general-brother Chilarai created patronage links with him, offering safety, resources, and a secure environment for the spread of Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma, the creation of literary works, and the performance of religious arts. [Sutradhar \(2022\)](#)

Patronage made it possible for Namghars and Sattras to quickly proliferate, particularly in the Koch area. This allowed for institutional growth that could have been challenging under more antagonistic or dispersed regimes. However, this connection also meant that Sankardeva's reforms had to strike a balance between radical egalitarianism and the political demands of royal patrons, which called for concessions like the use of royal symbols, potential doctrine changes to appease elite sensibilities, and handling competing local claims for recognition and support.

Patronage did, however, also create dependencies that limited individual freedom. The movement was exposed to the vagaries of politics, even though royal favor allowed for greater mobility and protection from certain enemies. For example, shifts in courtly favor, rivalry between rulers, and pressure from rival religious or territorial elites could result in periods of exile, relocation, or liturgical compromise. [Dutta \(2017\)](#)

In regions influenced by the Ahom, for example, Sankardeva and his followers occasionally faced suspicion or persecution, particularly from conservative Brahmanical or tantric elements that saw Neo-Vaishnavism's challenges to ritual hierarchy and caste norms as threatening, even though Koch patronage meant safety in Koch territories. As a result, the development and nature of the movement were influenced over time by political compromise, reciprocal duties, patron-imposed restrictions, and Sankardeva's vision. These factors contribute to the explanation of why, despite the movement's devotional and reformist core, institutionalization under Sattras ultimately resulted in internal hierarchy, rivalry for patronage, and occasionally theological moderation.

2) Namghar Institution and Congregational Culture

One of Srimanta Sankardeva's most radical institutional innovations was the Namghar (prayer hall), which served as a democratic social hub in Assamese communities in addition to being a place of devotional worship. The Namghar provided a more straightforward, inclusive setting where followers of all castes, tribes, and backgrounds came together to chant naam, hear talks, and take part in group rituals without the intervention of hierarchical priestly classes, in contrast to temple traditions that frequently called for Brahmin priests, complex rituals, and caste-based observances. Sankardeva envisioned the first Namghar at Bordowa as a place of prayer that was as much about spiritual connection as it was about social equality; its egalitarian attitude was reinforced by the humble construction, the lack of idols, and the unrestricted involvement of everyone.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Guru Asana-The mark of Sankardeva Ek-Sarana Sysem

Courtesy: Author Guptajit Pathak

Plate-1: The Guru Asana, a sacred and symbolic seat used in Naamghars and Sattras, symbolizes Srimanta Sankardeva's spiritual presence and authority in the Ek-Sarana tradition. The Neo-Vaishnavite practice replaces idol worship with this object, which is usually made of wood and decorated with religious patterns. Its existence embodies the movement's focus on bhakti (devotion), simplicity, and

equal spiritual access, reflecting the importance of the guru and scripture in the faith.

The Namghars' role grew much beyond their religious duties as their network spread throughout Assam. They developed into hubs for cultural performance, conflict mediation, and community decision-making. Namghars frequently hosted events like borgeet devotional hymns and bhaona dramatic enactments, which united individuals from many socioeconomic classes, fostering respect for one another and a sense of community. In many instances, Namghars functioned as a sort of proto-village council, where community welfare issues were debated and decisions were made collectively. Their function as places of common ownership, social discipline, and moral regulation was further reinforced by their wide halls, simple architecture, sparse adornment, locally sourced materials, and community-based governance. In medieval Assam, the ceremonial and cultural life centered around Namghars greatly influenced the change in societal attitudes toward caste and ritual purity, even though it was not impervious to local injustices.

3) Monastic Organizations and Sattra Institutions

In medieval Assam, the Sattra institutions founded by Srimanta Sankardeva and his followers served as the main hubs for community organization, ritual performance, textual scholarship, and spiritual training. The mahantas or satradhikars who oversaw these monastic centers' administrative and spiritual functions included teaching followers (bhakats), maintaining manuscripts, planning devotional events like bhaona, and managing the sattra's financial foundations, such as land grants, agricultural products, and donations.⁶ The sattra system evolved over time into a number of Sanghati denominations or subsects, including the Purusha Sanghati, Kala, Nika, and Brahma Sanghati, among others. Each of these groups has its own emphasis on ceremonial purity, celibacy, connection to Vedic rites, and modes of devotional expression. Different models of internal hierarchy were also produced by this diversification: although many sattras started out with relatively egalitarian participation, over the course of generations, some sattras gained prestige through patronage, royal endowments, or the accumulation of manuscripts and relics. Mahantas, or the heads of major sattras, became powerful individuals with subordinate functionaries, lineage claims, and occasionally rivalry between sattras.

4) Changes in Social Attitudes and Caste

Neo-Vaishnavism's opposition to strict caste divisions was one of its most notable effects. Srimanta Sankardeva invited converts from non-Brahmin, tribal, and underprivileged communities, preaching that genuine devotion was more important than birth. This created opportunities for spiritual dignity and social mobility outside of caste-based exclusion. For instance, congregational worship at Namghars permitted devotional involvement regardless of caste rank, and the movement's initiation rituals (Saran) were accessible to individuals of all castes and tribes. [Sahapedia \(2021\)](#)

Social prejudices did not, however, vanish instantly in reality. Caste-style customs gradually resurfaced in local society and Sattra communities. Social stratifications were partially reaffirmed by some subsequent sattra administrations through the adoption of internal ranking and privileges, but within a revised ethical framework.⁸ In other situations, people from formerly lower castes continued to endure prejudice in social situations, even when they were present at religious events, and some sanghatism denominations of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement maintained Brahminical components in leadership, ritual, or status.

5) Cultural Innovations: Literary Language, Drama, and Music

An Assam's literary and performing arts revival was sparked by Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism movement. He choreographed Sattriya dance forms, created Ankia Nats (one-act dramas), and wrote devotional songs for the Borgeets. He also advocated for bridging linguistic gaps through the use of Brajavali, a hybrid poetry media. Only 34 of the approximately 240 borgeets that Sankardeva is credited with writing have survived because of fire; they were placed in ragas and adapted themselves to devotional singing in namghars and sattras. Ankia Nats addressed theological and moral issues in ways that the general public could understand by fusing conversation, song, dance, and theatrical structure. They frequently used Brajavali. [Hoque \(2020\)](#)

Both aesthetic and communicative purposes were served by these artistic mediums. They promoted emotional commitment, formed vernacular identity, and disseminated theological narratives. These genres became firmly ingrained in Assamese cultural life as a result of the Sattria institutions' continued preservation, instruction, and growth. The preservation function guaranteed the survival of language forms, musical styles, and theatrical repertory. Moreover, a multifaceted cultural ecology where religious practice and daily life blended together was produced by the interaction of performance dance, drama, music Borgeets, and literary production plays and lyrical treatises. The development of Assamese identity as a cultural and linguistic entity separate from surrounding areas was greatly aided by this.

Mask-making has its roots in Srimanta Sankardeva's cultural and dramatic developments, especially in the Sattria institutions. Sankardeva created Ankia Naat, a distinctive kind of devotional theater that blended dance, music, and storytelling, as part of his attempts to make religious teachings approachable and interesting for the general public. Intricately designed masks were employed to improve the performances' visual and dramatic appeal, particularly when portraying mythological figures like demons, animals, or divine entities.

These masks, which were frequently constructed from fabric, clay, and bamboo, became indispensable instruments for expressing identity, emotion, and symbolism on stage. As a living tradition that connects performance, devotion, and craftsmanship, mask-making has developed into a unique art form that reflects the depth of Neo-Vaishnavite culture in terms of aesthetics, spirituality, and storytelling.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Traditional Wooden Mask from the Era of Sankardeva
Courtesy: Author Guptajit Pathak

Plate-2: The Ankia Naat performances relied heavily on the traditional wooden masks made by Sankardeva, which enhanced the dramatic narration of religious stories. These expertly crafted masks from artists helped portray a variety of mythological figures and successfully communicated emotions on stage, increasing the community's understanding and interest in spiritual teachings.

7. OPPOSITION AND RITUAL CHANGE

By drastically simplifying religious procedures, the Neo-Vaishnavism movement, spearheaded by Srimanta Sankardeva, signaled a break from the prevalent ritualistic customs of medieval Assam. The rejection of animal sacrifice, complex sacrificial rites, tantric rituals, and other forms of excessive ritualism that were commonly practiced by local tantric cults and followers of Shaktism was essential to this change. Rather, along with canonical recitation and communal contributions that encouraged accessibility and group involvement in religious life, Neo-Vaishnavism placed a strong emphasis on nama-prasanga, or the congregational chanting of the Lord's name, as a fundamental devotional practice. By lowering dependency on Brahmanical priests and intricate ceremonial processes, this change sought to democratize spiritual experience and make devotion accessible to all societal segments, regardless of caste or socioeconomic standing. Additionally, the movement's ethical focus on internal devotion (bhakti) above external ritual performance was in line with the streamlined ritual paradigm. [Saikia \(1985\)](#)

Nevertheless, there was opposition and contestation to this ceremonial modification. The established religious elites frequently saw Neo-Vaishnavism as subversive, posing a danger to their ceremonial authority and socio-religious domination, particularly those who were devoted to tantric and Shakti traditions. Tensions in certain areas turned into open confrontations, forcing Sankardeva's followers to compromise with local sensitivities and occasionally scale back their actions to gain broader societal acceptance. [Neog \(1983\)](#) These exchanges highlight the movement's capacity to adjust pragmatically while striking a balance between reformist fervor and the demands of a hierarchical and pluralistic society. To lessen resistance, the movement occasionally included regional ritual components while maintaining its central emphasis on commitment and ceremonial reduction. The long-term expansion and ultimate institutionalization of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam's intricate socio-religious environment depended heavily on this dynamic process of compromise and adaptation.

7.1. SOCIAL ETHICS, FAMILY, AND GENDER

A major change in the religious and social standing of women in medieval Assam was brought about by the Neo-Vaishnavism movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva, especially with regard to their involvement in devotional activities. Sankardeva's reformist vision permitted women to actively participate in chanting, singing devotional hymns (borgeets), and attending collective worship in namghars, in contrast to many modern religious traditions where women's involvement was limited or mediated through male priests. [Neog \(1983\)](#) By enabling women to participate in communal rites and collective religious life, this inclusion promoted a sense of spiritual equality that was comparatively progressive for its time. A more inclusive social environment where respect for one another inside the household was valued was fostered by the movement's ethical foundation, which also rejected

discrimination based on caste. The sattras and namghars' ethical precepts made it abundantly evident that peaceful family relationships based on empathy, modesty, and societal duty were necessary. A social ethic that promoted a morally upright household life and went beyond strict caste lines was strengthened by these ideals. [Dutta \(2015\)](#)

Nonetheless, patriarchal standards persisted in being firmly ingrained in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement's institutional and social structures in spite of these developments in devotional inclusivity. The majority of men held leadership posts in the sattras, including that of mahanta (head priest) and other religious authorities. This was a reflection of the gender hierarchies that were in place at the time, which prevented women from occupying formal positions of authority. The movement did not essentially alter inheritance rules or conventional marriage arrangements, which nonetheless upheld patriarchal ideals and male control over family assets and decision-making. [Saikia \(1985\)](#) As a result, although Sankardeva's creation of a devotional space provided new opportunities for women to engage in religion, it did little to address the larger social and economic injustices that women in medieval Assamese society faced. The intricate relationship between religious reform and cultural tradition during this time is shown by the coexistence of advanced devotional practices with enduring gender inequality. [Barua \(2010\)](#)

8. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTINUITIES

Beyond the medieval era, Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism movement has left a lasting legacy that has a significant impact on the sociocultural makeup of modern-day Assam. The institutional structures of namghars and sattras remain essential hubs for communal identification, religious activity, and cultural preservation. As essential elements of Assamese cultural legacy, artistic manifestations like borgeet devotional songs, Sattriya dance, and bhaona theatrical performances have not only endured but are also actively honored. These artistic disciplines reinforce a collective Assamese identity that prioritizes social cohesiveness, artistic expression, and spiritual devotion. They also act as living traditions and means of passing forward the ethical and religious principles inherent in Neo-Vaishnavism. Sankardeva is regarded in contemporary Assam not just as a religious reformer but also as a unifying force whose teachings continue to inspire ideas of moral vision and cultural harmony among many communities. [Barua \(2012\)](#)

The institutional legacy of the Neo-Vaishnavism movement, however, offers a challenging and occasionally contentious landscape. Even while the namghars and sattras continue to play a significant role in religious and cultural life, many of them have established themselves in hierarchical systems and are occasionally involved in local and regional politics. Discussions over the movement's original egalitarian character have been triggered by this institutional rigidity, especially in relation to caste exclusivity, ceremonial purity, and doctrinal rigor. Within Assam's religious and cultural circles, the enduring conflict between Sankardeva's original principles of inclusivity and spiritual equality and the conservative inclinations of certain institutional authorities continues to spark critical thought and discussion. Neo-Vaishnavism's dynamic significance in Assam's changing identity politics and cultural manifestations is highlighted by this continuing negotiation, which also informs modern interpretations of the religion. [Kalita \(2016\)](#)

Table 1

Table 1 Historical Perspectives on the Neo-Vaishnavist Movement and Srimanta Sankardeva	
Aspect	Details
Duration	CE 15 th –16 th century
Area	Assam in the Middle Ages (mostly the Brahmaputra Valley)
Crucial Person	Saint, reformer, dramatist, poet, and founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568)
Philosophy of Religion	Eka Sarana Dharma: casteism, ritualism, and idolatry are rejected in favor of monotheistic devotion to Lord Krishna (Vishnu).
Key Texts Employed	Translations and simplifications of the Bhagavata Purana, particularly the Bhagavata Book, for general comprehension
Cultural Inputs	• One-act dramas called Ankiya Naat, • Devotional songs called Borgeet, • Sattriya dance • Assam vernacular literature
Important Organizations	• Pray hall Namghar • Monastery establishments Sattras are hubs of religious and cultural activity.
Impact of Socio-Religious	• Advancing social equality, • Opposing Brahmanical dogma • Uplifting underprivileged communities
Influence in Politics	• Some Ahom monarchs supported the movement, • Brahmins • Orthodox elites occasionally opposed it.
Opposition and Persecution	Due to local political difficulties and orthodox response, Sankardeva and his followers encountered opposition and were forced to relocate regularly.
Literature and Art	Growing popularity of Assam vernacular literature and the creation of religious performances and music for devotion and mass education
Legacy	The establishment of a cohesive cultural identity, religious, social, and cultural life is still influenced by Sattras.

9. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The major findings of the study are-

- 1) Srimanta Sankardeva's movement was firmly based in a vision of moral and social change rather than just being devotional or theological in goal. With pragmatic social goals like dismantling caste barriers, advancing vernacular language, and shifting religious expression away from ritual spectacle and toward inward devotion, his Eka-Sarana Nama Dharma distilled the core of Bhakti, which is centered on love and submission to an ethereal God.
- 2) Despite the movement's spiritual doctrinal underpinnings, political backing particularly from the Koch dynasty under leaders like Naranarayana and Chilarai was crucial to its growth and institutional durability. This patronage demonstrated how religious reform in medieval Assam was closely linked to the political environment by giving new Sattras credibility, territory, and protection.
- 3) One of Neo-Vaishnavism's most revolutionary achievements was the construction of Namghars, or communal prayer rooms. Serving as non-Brahmanical, egalitarian places of worship and discussion, Namghars democratized access to religion, particularly for rural and non-elite

- populations. These facilities established the groundwork for participatory religiosity in Assamese culture by serving as pillars of local government, spiritual education, and community organizing.
- 4) The Sattras system provided a centralized, monastic framework that preserved Sankardeva's teachings and helped standardize behaviors. But as the Sattras expanded, they created internal hierarchies, written regulations, and divisions among followers, occasionally replicating the very social exclusions the movement aimed to overcome. As a result, institutionalization not only guaranteed survival but also complicated power dynamics.
 - 5) Sankardeva's reform was notable for its outspoken opposition to caste orthodoxy. The movement promoted a more inclusive religious and social fabric by allowing underprivileged people, including lower castes, artisans, and tribal groups, to participate by rejecting Brahmanical mediation and placing an emphasis on direct devotion through naam (chanting). The degree of this inclusion, however, differed throughout time and between geographical areas.
 - 6) Sankardeva brought about significant changes in ritual practice, eschewing complex ceremonies, idol worship, and animal sacrifice in favor of inner devotion and simplicity. These changes were not merely symbolic; they represented a cultural revolution that made religion more approachable, compassionate, and in line with changing moral standards. Additionally, it permitted a departure from the prevalent Tantric and Shakta customs of the era.
 - 7) It was a cultural renaissance movement. Sankardeva used the arts to promote spiritual expression and cultural cohesion through Borgeet (devotional music), Bhaona (religious drama), Ankia Naat (one-act plays), and Sattriya dance (now a classical form). In addition to enriching Assamese culture, these developments provided a platform for the mass popularization of abstract religious beliefs.
 - 8) Sankardeva used Brajavali, a combination of Assamese, Sanskrit, and Maithili, to create poetic and understandable compositions. He opened up access to religious knowledge by eschewing the exclusivity of Sanskrit. In order to develop a uniform Assamese literary identity and foster a sense of collective cultural belonging, this linguistic shift was essential.
 - 9) Women were given more opportunities to participate in devotions under Neo-Vaishnavism, particularly through congregational chanting and performance. Nonetheless, traditional gender norms continued to exist in both the institutional and home domains, and men continued to dominate Sattras' core leadership. As a result, although the movement promoted spiritual inclusivity, patriarchal societal systems was not entirely upended.
 - 10) Established religious groups frequently opposed Sankardeva and his believers, especially Brahmanical priests and Shakta devotees who saw Neo-Vaishnavism as a challenge to ceremonial and financial dominance. Strategic negotiation, theological discussion, and occasionally compromise were necessary for the movement's survival and growth, demonstrating that transformation did not take place in a vacuum but rather in contested socio-religious territory.

- 11) Sankardeva's legacy was preserved through institutionalization through Sattras and doctrinal standards, but some of the radical impulses of early reform were also restrained. Sattras gradually became characterized by orthodoxy, exclusionary tendencies, and hierarchical control, indicating a conflict between the need of administrative continuity and the principles of spiritual equality.
- 12) Sankardeva continues to be a key cultural and moral icon in the contemporary identity of Assam. His principles are acknowledged as moral pillars in everything from politics and literature to education and common social conventions. His image and writings are still used in discussions about nationalism, regional pride, and interfaith understanding, proving that a medieval reformer is still relevant in today's world.
- 13) The movement left behind a rich material culture in addition to texts and teachings, including manuscripts, Sattras and Namghar architecture, ceremonial objects, and iconography that gave concrete embodiment to abstract concepts. These artifacts, which are still in use and are highly valued, demonstrate how religious ideology influenced daily life as well as places, objects, and people.
- 14) Sankardeva's teachings and institutions provided a common moral and spiritual framework that cut across group barriers in an area historically characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and tribal diversity. As a result, the movement was essential in bringing disparate populations and polities together into a more unified cultural and political entity while preserving regional differences. Its enduring relevance includes this integrative function.

10. CONCLUSION

A thorough and historically informed examination of Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavite movement as a significant force behind the sociopolitical and cultural change in medieval Assam has been given by this work. This study illustrates how a religious revival went beyond spiritual renewal to serve as a means of social integration, vernacular cultural consolidation, and identity formation by placing Sankardeva's reform within the intricate political context and examining his creative institutional frameworks, including the namghar, sattras, and devotional arts. Sankardeva's lasting influence on Assamese culture and cultural ethos was highlighted by his innovative fusion of lofty religious ideals with approachable forms of worship and community development. [Neog \(1983\)](#)

However, the analysis draws attention to the fundamental conflict between institutionalized realities and reformist objectives. The egalitarian and anti-hierarchical tendencies of the movement eventually ran afoul of the long-standing dynamics of power, social stratification, and political demands, particularly within the leadership and the sattras monastic order. Assamese cultural and literary traditions were significantly altered by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, but these changes also required constant negotiating with regional caste conventions, social structures, and governmental patronage, illustrating the intricate relationship between idealism and realism. [Barua \(1999\)](#)

The legacy of Neo-Vaishnavism and Sankardeva in modern Assam continues to spark discussions about social justice, cultural identity, and intercommunal harmony. His structures and ideas are still relevant but disputed, with continuous

conflicts over ritual orthodoxy, caste customs, and institutional politics exposing difficulties in upholding the movement's core egalitarian ideal. Through archival study, ethnographic fieldwork in sattras groups, and comparative studies with other Indian Bhakti traditions, future scholarship could deepen understanding and place Assam's distinct historical experience within larger trends of social and religious transformation. [Dutta \(2020\)](#)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Barua, A. (1999), *Socio-Cultural History of Assam*, Spectrum Publications, 187-191.
- Barua, A. R. (2010), "Patriarchy and Religion: Gender Roles in Medieval Assam," *Assam Historical Review*, 14, 112-115.
- Barua, A. R. (2012), *Cultural Heritage of Assam: Neo-Vaishnavism and the Arts*, Assam University Press, 210-215.
- Das, D. & Saikia, C.R. (2020), "Neo-Vaishnavism Movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam: Its Socio-Cultural Imprints", *International Journal of Management*, Vol. 11 (10), 1396-1398.
- Dutta, A. (2017), "Role of the State and Traditional Institutions in Identity Formation: A Study of the Namghar in Assam," *Journal of North East India Studies*, 7 (2), 46-56.
- Dutta, B.R. (2015), "Social Ethics in the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement: Gender and Family," *Journal of Assam Studies*, 9 (2), 87-89.
- Dutta, B.R. (2018), "Institutional Dynamics and Social Change in Neo-Vaishnavism," *Journal of Assam Studies*, Vol. 11 (1), 95-98.
- Dutta, R.B. (2020), "Neo-Vaishnavism and Modern Assamese Identity," *Journal of Assam Studies*, 15 (2), 120-124.
- Dutta, R.B. (2020), "Structure Technology in the Sattras of Assam, India", *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(4), 1349-1351. <https://doi.org/10.37200/IJPR/V24I4/PR201107>
- Hoque, A. (2020), "Relation Between Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva And Assamese Society: A Brief Study", *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 16(2), 45-46.
- Kalita, B. J. (2016), *Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnava Movement in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective*, *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 4 (8), 159-161.
- Kalita, B.J. (2016), *Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnava Movement in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective*, *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 4(8), 157-159.
- Khataniar, D. (2022), *Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and Satra Institutions*, *Vegueta: Anuario de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia*, 22 (1), 398-400.
- Neog, M. (1983), *Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam*, Gauhati University Press, 45-48.
- Neog, M. (1983), *Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam*, 1983, Gauhati University Press, 157-160.

- Neog, M. (1983), *Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam*, Gauhati University Press, 142-145.
- Sahapedia, (2021), "Sattras of Assam: Knowledge Traditions, Practices and Rituals Institutions", article by Abismrita Chakravarty, 3-4
- Saikia, A. (1985), *Socio-Political History of Assam from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Spectrum Publications, 201-203.
- Saikia, A. (1985), *Socio-Political History of Assam from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Spectrum Publications, 216-218.
- Sutradhar, K.C. (2022), Role of Maharaja Naranarayana in the Consolidation of the Koch Kingdom: A Historical Study, *International Journal of Historical Insight and Research*, 45-48. <https://doi.org/10.48001/ijhir.2022.08.02.002>