

Social Reform and the Bhakti Tradition in Medieval Assam: Reading the 'Borgeet' of Srimanta Sankardeva

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the *borgeet* of Srimanta Sankardeva and examine the linkages between his social interventions and his philosophical vision, as articulated in his devotional compositions. Through a close reading of select *borgeet* of Sankardeva, we have elucidated the complex relationship between his egalitarian social vision and the Advaita Vedanta philosophy that animates his compositions. We argue that an egalitarian ethos does not merely inform Sankardeva's *borgeet* at the level of content, but, in fact, is the organising principle of communities formed around the practice of such compositions in *Kirtanas*. We are just as interested in asking the question of the relevance of such a study in contemporary times. What do Sankardeva's *borgeet* offer to the modern auditor and reader? We argue that Sankardeva's *borgeet* are a fertile site to pursue questions about identity, faith, and social reform from the perspective of Indic traditions. While the regnant frameworks of understanding identity within academia are largely derived from colonial modernity, our project aims at recuperating other ways of thinking the self.

Keywords: faith, modernity, selfhood, neo-Vaishnavism, Indic traditions

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sankardeva As A Vaishnav Bhakti Saint

Srimanta Sankardeva holds a significant position in the cultural and religious history of the region of Assam. He was born in a place called Alipukhuri, now located in the Nagaon district of Assam. Most of what we know today about Srimanta Sankardeva is derived from the oral traditions of his *borgeet* and *Kirtana* and the hagiographical accounts of the saint. The word "hagios" originates in the Greek language, it has been translated to English as "saint/saintly" or "holy." The word 'hagiography' refers to biographies of saints. In most of these hagiographies, Sankardeva is depicted as an avatar of Lord Vishnu. The accounts of Srimanta Sankardeva's childhood in these

hagiographies resemble the accounts of miraculous feats performed by Lord Krishna in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.

According to most accounts, Sankardeva spent his childhood in the care of his grandmother after losing both his parents at a young age. He is supposed to have received his early education in a *tol*, which were educational institutions run by Brahman teachers in medieval Assam. Sankardeva's early education included instruction in ancient Indic scriptural traditions, including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Ramayana* (Neog, 1965/2021). He grew up to be a polymath in the true sense of the word: not only was Sankardeva

a saint, but also, a playwright, a scholar, and a musician.

The most remarkable imprint of his legacy on the popular religious life in Assam is his doctrine of 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma.' The phrase 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' literally means that the sole refuge for the believer is in the (chanting of) name of their *ishtadeva*¹. Sankardeva's emphasis on bhakti and a personalised relationship with the deity not only simplified practices of worship, but also, allowed the development of the vision of a caste-inclusive society.

The hagiographies about Sankardeva reveal that to begin with, he led a life of settled domesticity and had a daughter. It was only after he had discharged his domestic responsibilities and overseen the marriage of his daughter after the death of his wife, that he went on his first pilgrimage. These writings also mention the names of the holy towns of North and South India that Sankardeva visited during his pilgrimage. It was during his pilgrimage across the Indic mainland that Sankardeva came in touch with the current of popular devotionism that had been transforming the religious ethos across the subcontinent. The central themes of the Bhakti movement including personalised, emotional connection with one's *ishtadeva* and a relative disregard for rituals form the bedrock of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam spearheaded by Sankardeva, on his return from his pilgrimages.

A brief note on the Bhakti movement is in order here. The Bhakti movement emerged in southern India around the seventh century CE and spread to the Northern parts of the subcontinent by the fifteenth century (Thakur, 1994). The movement focused on love and devotion to one's *ishtadeva*. The Bhakti Movement has often been seen as a reform movement within the Hindu traditions. The most groundbreaking ideas that emerged through its spread include an emphasis on a personalised form of worship in lieu of rigid hierarchies and rituals. The movement promoted the idea that one could attain *moksha* or self-realisation without the help of an intermediary priest. Making available a form of radical spiritual equality, the Bhakti Movement made the goal of self-realisation available for all people, irrespective of their castes and gender.

Sankardeva's devotion to Krishna found expression in the form of *borgeet*, *Kirtana* and scripts of

Krishna Leela, based on the episodes from the *Bhagavata Purana*. The *borgeet* are a type of religious songs played with instruments such as the *khol* (an indigenous rendition of the *dhhol* or drum) and *taal* (an indigenous percussion instrument consisting of a pair of cymbals). These songs are similar to the *Dhrupad*² in their lyrics and the style of singing, although there are differences in the rhythm of the two forms (Gogoi, 2015). Sankardeva's *borgeet* are often accompanied by dance and/or enactment of lyrics that recount stories associated with Krishna.

Following is an exemplary *borgeet* that records Sankardeva's devotion to Hari:

Saphala jivana yo jantu nitya jalpatu

Râmâ Keshava nâsevi yo jivaya bita kîta upamâ

Yâkeri châkeri karatahu gati pâtakî pâi

Shankara kaha, sohi Hariko, kati bhakati nakâi

Life of that creature is successful who worships Râma always

One who lives without worshipping Keshava is comparable to insects of excreta

Sinners are redeemed by worshipping whose feet

Shankara says, why do you not worship that Hari (Borkakoti, 2012, p.230).

The goal of life for a spiritual seeker within the Hindu religious traditions is *moksha* or self-realisation. Different sects and philosophical schools within Hinduism recommend different paths to this end. The bhakti saints upheld love and devotion to the deity as the best ways to attain the goal of self-realisation. In the *borgeet* excerpted above, Sankardeva declares worship of Rama to be the sole path to enlightenment.

Sankardeva's *borgeet* often offer a testimony to his journey from a state of spiritual naivete to maturation as a devotee. In the *borgeet* that follows, Sankardeva acknowledges the dispersion of the self in the pursuit of wealth. Spiritual clarity ensues from a resolute rejection of mundane goals in favour of *ananya bhakti* or one-pointed surrender to Hari. Sankardeva says:

Dhrugh: Siri Râma, mai ati pâpî pâmaru teri bhâvanâ nâi

Janama chintâmani kâhe gayo yaise kâchaka lâi

Pada: Divase bishaya biyâkula, nishi shayane govâi

¹ *Ishtadeva* refers to the form of the deity that is the object of adoration and devotion to the devotee.

² *Dhrupad* is the oldest existing form of North Indian classical music.

Mana dhana khoji bimohita, teri ârati nâi

Hridaya kamale Hari baithaha, chinto charana nâ teri

Karala garala yaise bhojana, hâmu amiyâ heri Parama mûrukha hâmu

Mâdhava, eku bhakati na jânâ Dâsa dâsa buli târahu, ehu

Shankara bhânâ Râma nâma maha nikhila punya raha ohi nigama tattva bânî

Kaliko parama dharama Hari nâma parhi punu marana nâjâni

Refrain: O Râma, I am a heavy sinner there is no thought about thee

Why did I squander this life as one prefers glass to gem

Verse: Engrossed in mundane affairs in day time, nights are lost in slumber

Mind embroiled in search of wealth there is no prayer of thee

Hari sits in the lotus of heart, I do not think about thy feet

As if I drank poison of mundane affairs keeping aside the nectar

I am a great fool, O Mâdhava I do not know any devotion

Save me considering as servant's servant this is the submission of Shankara (Borkakoti, 2012, p.251)

As discussed earlier, a feature common to all bhakti saints is that they express their devotion to their *ishtadeva*, through bhajans, songs, chanting the numerous names of one's Ishta mentioned in the puranic literature, dancing in Kirtanas, and even enacting episodes from the lives of the various *avatars* of one's *ishtadeva*. The neo-Vaishnavite Movement led by Sankardeva in the fifteenth century CE has been considered a part of this greater Bhakti Movement. Not only did this movement popularise Vaishnavism in the region, but also provided the region with a cultural identity. The 'Ek Sarana Nama Dharma' sect that was founded by Sankardeva offered an alternate cohesive identity to its followers-called the 'Sankari'- that transcended narrow boundaries of caste and creed. The *Naam Kirtan* and *Borgeet* of Sankardev have become an integral part of the more mainstream rituals such as the shraddha ceremony and created a more syncretic sense of identity and practices in Assam.

Another popular form that devotion to Krishna took in the neo-Vaishnavite movement that emerged in Assam in the fifteenth century was the *Sattriya*

Nritya or the *Sattriya* dance. Interestingly, the *Sattriya* has become one of the major classical dances of contemporary India. Sankardev also scripted many *ankiya naat* or one-act plays based on the life of Krishna. The performance of these one-act plays is called *bhaona*, a term that can be loosely translated as "dramatic enactment."

These forms of devotional practices were taught and practiced in the *sattr* and *namghar*, which were the institutional centres founded by Sankardeva for the proliferation of Vaishnavism. A significant aspect of these institutional centres was their egalitarian ethos. The *sattras* and *namghar* developed into centres where devotees from all castes sang the *borgeet* and the *Kirtana*, danced the *sattriya* and performed the *ankiya naat* and thereby gained training in the various forms of devotional performances.

Sankardeva translated several Hindu scriptures from Sanskrit into the vernacular language in usage in the region during the period. A few examples of the same include his rendering of the *Garuda Purana*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* into the vernacular. These translations made the scriptures accessible to the lay people at large and represent a milestone in the popularisation and democratisation of the High-Tradition of the Sanskrit religious corpus. Sankardeva believed that education and spiritual knowledge lead to an all-round development of human beings. He encouraged both men and women to engage in learning because he maintained that education was necessary for a good life. Sankardeva's Advaita Vedanta (non-dualistic) philosophy and the social changes that it enabled in his contemporary society, will be discussed further in the paper.

1.2 Literature Review

Maheshwar Neog's book titled *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of The Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam* offers a lucid historical account of the various religious traditions among different population groups in Assam before the advent of Sankardeva (Sankardeva, 1965/2021). It further provides a detailed account of the neo-Vaishnavite movement and discusses its social and cultural implications and the criticism it drew from its contemporary detractors. With very little preceding research on the area, Neog's book first published in 1965 acts as a treasure trove of a well-researched historical account, as well as analyses for any student of Sankardeva's oral corpus.

Maheshwar Neog draws upon royal chronicles, Sanskrit commentaries on Tantra and other historical and literary sources to reconstruct Sankardeva's

socio-historical context. He also discusses multiple hagiographies of Sankardeva and offers his own biographical sketch of the saint. The last chapter of Maheshwar Neog's book, "Social Implications of Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement," gives an account of the social realisation of Sankardeva's vision in the Bhakti movement. Accounts of Sankardeva's firm stand against the practice of animal sacrifice, a part of the ritualistic worship within certain Shakta traditions, are discussed extensively by Maheshwar Neog. Almost all the hagiographies discussed by Maheshwar Neog, thematise the inclusivity of his devotional sect. Maheshwar Neog remarks, "Kaivartas, Kolitas, Sudras, Koces and Brahmans sat together during congregations to repast on milk, fried rice (*cira*), bananas, etc." (Neog, 1965/2021, p.361)

The widespread prevalence of the practices of Shaivism and Shaktism in ancient Assam has been discussed by Gitima Kalita in her article "Practice of Hinduism in the Ancient Society of Assam" (2022). Scholars such as Chandan Baruah have discussed the beginnings of neo-Vaishnavism in the region under the Ahom rule in his essay titled "Hinduisation of the Ahom Court in Medieval Assam" (2004). The Ahoms of South-East Asian are believed to have arrived in the region in the thirteenth century. They ruled for about a period of six hundred years until the early nineteenth century. The Ahoms witnessed the beginning and the development of the neo-Vaishnavite movement during their reign. With the inclusion of Brahmans in the court of the tribal Ahoms, the kings began incorporating practices from the mainstream Hindu tradition such as the coronation ceremony of rulers into the courtly life. Chandan Baruah's essay describes the conflicts between the neo-Vaishnavite followers of Sankardeva and the Brahmanical upholders of orthodox practice.

Dilip Kr. Deka and Suman Barman in their article, "Teachings of Sankardeva - Its Relevance in Modern Assamese Society," offer their views on the cultural importance of Sankardeva's teachings in contemporary times. They draw a similarity between the philosophy of Sankardeva and that of Swami Vivekananda in that both these religious practitioners maintained that the true realisation of religion is possible only through a vision located firmly in the human heart (Deka & Barman, 2021). What is entailed by such a vision is an ethico-philosophical vision that foregrounds humane values and love for all forms of life. Sankardeva's path of devotion and his eventual construction of *Sattras* and *Namghor*, Dilip Kr. Deka and Suman Barman argue that Sankardeva played a significant role in social reform

movements in medieval Assam. Sankardev's humanist vision, on this view, sowed seeds of social-change in medieval Assam and subjected to a trenchant critique of the hierarchies of caste and gender.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper undertakes a close reading of select *borgeet* of Sankardeva to examine his philosophical and social vision. It has often been observed by commentators on medieval Assamese society that Sankardeva's *borgeet* and *Kirtana* played a significant cultural role in the promotion of an egalitarian vision that underpinned the widespread social reforms in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Assam (Neog, 1965/2021). Sankardeva composed his *borgeet* and other writings in the *brajavali*³ language. The *brajavali* is a form of the Assamese language, containing elements of the Magadhi Abahatta and Maithili within it (Gogoi, 2015). In the hagiographical literature, Sankardeva has been credited with the composition of about two hundred forty *borgeet*. However, only thirty-four of these *borgeet* are supposed to have survived the ravages of time as most accounts indicate that the original manuscripts containing them got damaged in a fire accident (Borkakoti, 2012).

We have used Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti's *Great Songs: English Renderings of Srimanta Sankardeva's Borgeet* as our primary text. It is significant to note here that Borkakoti's English translation of Sankardev's *borgeet* is the first and only comprehensive translation of all the surviving *borgeet* of Sankardeva. It is one of the aims of our study to draw attention to the inadequate literary-critical attention that Sankardeva's *borgeet* have received from translators and scholars of English Studies. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti attests to prioritising content over poetic qualities such as rhythm in his translations and reminds the readers that Sankardeva's *borgeet* are best enjoyed in the original. A significant secondary resource, we have used for our project is, Maheshwar Neog's seminal book, *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. The chief strength of Neog's book is the wealth of biographical information it provides on Sankardeva and the detailed socio-historical account it offers of

³ *Brajavali* is also the language that of Sankardeva's first disciple Madhavadeva. He too is credited with the composition of several *borgeet*.

the saint's work and the neo-Vaishnavite movement in medieval Assam.

We have undertaken a close study of some select *borgeet* of Sankardeva and developed a framework of comparative philosophy for our critical analyses. The reason we felt the need for such a philosophical framework is that we discovered a gap in the extant critical commentaries on Sankardeva. While there are numerous studies of the saint's life and his role as a social reformer, his *borgeet* and other devotional compositions await sustained analyses from a comparative philosophical perspective.

A significant aspect of our critical inquiry is the pursuit of the question of how to relate the philosophical vision encoded in the *borgeet* to the social reform movements in medieval Assam. We have attempted to study this question by interrogating the notions of selfhood articulated in the *borgeet*. The following set of questions guide our critical enterprise:

- How do the notions of selfhood that are articulated within Sankardeva's *borgeet* contrast with our understanding of the self in contemporary times?
- How do the notions of selfhood in pre-modern oral traditions, such as the bhakti tradition of Sankardeva, offer a critique of extant social hierarchies and exclusions?
- What is the contemporary relevance of this tradition?

Following is a brief Literature Review of the scholarship on Sankardeva in English. A survey of critical scholarship on Sankardeva's life and compositions in the Assamese language is outside the scope of this study. However, we acknowledge that the inclusion of responses to Sankardeva from the Assamese critical literature would have deeply enriched our perspective.

3. SANKARDEVA AND THE ADVAITA VEDANTA TRADITION

A brief exposition of the philosophical vision that underpins Sankardeva's *borgeet* would be helpful for our discussion of his reform initiatives. Scholars have noted the influence of the philosophical vision of Advaita Vedanta on the saint and its intersections with the elements of *sagun bhakti* in his devotional verse. Ankur Barua, for instance, in his paper titled "The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568): The Advaitic Brahman as the Beloved Friend", discusses the difficulty of neatly classifying

Sankardeva as either a *sagun bhakt* or an Advaita saint. The reason Sankardeva defies such categories of classification is that elements of *saguna bhakti* towards Lord Krishna and His *avatars* coexist with Advaita philosophy in Sankardeva's compositions and writings. Barua describes Sankardeva's corpus as one characterised by "intersections, overlaps, and disjunctions between *jñāna* and *bhakti*" (Barua, 2017, p.21).

Vedanta is one of the six schools of the ancient Indian philosophical traditions. The term is formed by joining the two words: *Veda* and "*anta*" and literally means "the conclusion of the Vedas." The word 'Advaita' has been translated as "non-dual." Ordinarily a (spiritually) 'unaware' person ("*mudha*" as Sankardeva calls them in one of his *borgeet*) has a sense of identity that is predicated on difference. Such a person derives his sense of self through his distinctiveness from others. The *jiva* or individual subject then is in the thrall of *avidya* or ignorance and invested in his separation from an "other." Self-realisation, on this view, entails the *jiva's* realisation that their true self or *atman* is one with *brahman* or the ultimate reality. This relationship of oneness or identity of the *atman* with the *brahman* is signified by the word *advaita* (non-dual). The apparent world of phenomenal diversity, for the philosophers of the Advaita school of thought, is a veritable illusion because the ultimate truth 'underlying' it, so to speak, is the non-dual *brahman* (Sharma, 1990).

A very accessible introduction to the question of selfhood within the Advaita tradition is to be found in a talk by Swami Sarvapriyananda in his aptly titled lecture, "Who Am I?" Swami Sarvapriyananda shares the answer to this question through his Advaita Vedantic reading of the *Mandukya Upanishad*. He explains that there are four states of consciousness according to the *Mandukya Upanishad*. These four states are described as *jagrat*, *swapna*, *sushupti* and *turiya*. Swami Sarvapriyananda explains that "*jagrat*" refers to the waking state- in which the subject interacts with the external world through the senses. The second state "*swapna*" or the dream-state is one in which the subject experiences the inner world of dreams. The third state, "*sushupti*", is state of deep-sleep. It is state in which the mind is at rest. The fourth state is the "*turiya*" and it is the state that transcends the first three states and is characterised as pure consciousness. We cannot address the questions about selfhood and identity within the Indic traditions without acknowledging this fourth state or

turiya within our theoretical framework (Sarvapriyananda, 2014, 17:40).

There are several implications of assuming the Advaita perspective on the question of selfhood. The most significant consequence of such a perspective is that within this tradition the *atman* is seen as identical to the *brahman*. This identity of the innermost aspect of the self or the *atman* with *brahman* may be realised by the spiritual-seeker through various paths and practices. The *Bhagvadgita*, for instance, elucidates the path of *jnan* or knowledge; the path of *nishkamya karman* or dispassionate performance of duty and the path of *bhakti* or devotion for the spiritual-seeker. These paths to self-realisation are not mutually exclusive either and there are often considerable overlaps in the spiritual practice of a seeker. The second important consequence of the non-dualist perspective on selfhood is that as the name indicates, the self and the circumambient universe are in a relationship of non-duality or oneness. Since our primary text are Sankardeva's *borgeet* that are part of the pre-modern oral tradition of Assam, we feel that our categories of analyses ought to attend to the historical specificity of their content of production. The Advaita perspective is particularly suited for a reading of Sankardeva's *borgeet* because these compositions evince a syncretic mix of the central elements of the non-dualist philosophy with elements of the bhakti tradition.

One of main differences in the manner that questions of selfhood and identity are theorised within pre-modern Indic traditions and canonical Western traditions of thought is in their respective perspective on the thematic of difference. The non-dualist tradition, which admittedly is only one among the six schools of ancient Indic *darsan* (loosely translated as philosophical systems), emphasise oneness of the *atman* and *brahman*. In contrast to that, canonical western traditions coterminous with modernity tend to emphasise the distinctness of the individual self. Even more significantly, the subjectivity of the subject on this view is formed through a successful (or otherwise) process of repression of socially-interdicted desires. A notable instance of such a perspective is Sigmund Freud's account of the development of the egoic self in his discussion of the Oedipus complex. In the Freudian model of the self, there are three distinct 'layers' to one's self: the id, the ego, and the superego. Interestingly, human subjectivity, in the Freudian model, is composed of dimensions that exceed the social self of the egoic being.

The influence of the Advaita Vedanta school of thought is evident in the compositions of Srimanta Sankardeva. Maheswar Neog clarifies that Sankardeva did not establish an entirely independent philosophy, rather he incorporated the Advaita perspectives into his religious credo and devotional verse. An example of such verse that exemplifies the Advaita vision is the *Kirtana-ghosha* by Sankardeva. The *Kirtana-ghosha* is a collection of songs originally composed in the *Brajavali* language. Sankardeva's *Kirtanas* were occasions for devotees to sing religious songs as a part of the neo-Vaishnavite community. The following excerpt from Ankur Barua's translation a *Kirtana-ghosha* conveys the Advaita vision of oneness quite succinctly:

You are the supreme self (paramātmā) of the world, the one true Lord,

There is nothing real that is distinct from you (eka bastu nāhike tomāra byatireka).

You are the cause and effect, and all the moving and non-moving beings,

Just as there is no difference between gold and its ornaments.

You are the beasts, birds, gods and demons, trees and herbs,

People, because of their ignorance (ajñānata), see these as different (bhinna bhinna).

They are deluded by your māyā at all times,

And do not see you as the self (ātmā)' (Barua, 2017, p.2).

In the *Kirtana* cited above, the devotee celebrates an omnipresent entity that is said to animate birds, trees, beasts, and in fact the entire universe. This is the central philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta tradition that maintains that the *atman* (approximately translated as the soul) is one with the all-pervading *brahman*. In the last line of the *Kirtana*, Sankardeva recommends introversion: to understand the truth of the *brahman*, one only needs to turn a meditative gaze inwards instead of looking outside at the multifarious phenomena. This emphasis on introversion within the High Tradition of Advaita Vedanta is the same as the exhortation to complete surrender to God in the Bhakti tradition, with the only difference that while the focus of the spiritual seeker is directed to the unchanging *brahman* within in the former, it is directed to the deity in *sagun* expressions of bhakti.

The spiritual vision of the essential oneness of all beings and entities is beautifully communicated in the following verse from one of Sankardeva's

borgeet followed by Borkakoti's translation of the excerpt:

Yata jîva jangama kîta patangama aga naga jaga teri kâyâ

Sabakahu mâri pûrata ohi udara nâhi karata bhûta dâya

Isha svarupe Hari saba ggate baithaha yaichana gagana biyâpi

Nindâ bâda pishuna hingsâ Hari teri karoho hâmu pâpi

Hari as God resides in all bodies just as the sky is all pervasive

Sankara says fervently be compassionate

Lord, so that I do not give up Rama's name

All sins are removed by your name knowing that I take resort in it (Borkakoti, 2012, p.183).

The very first line of the *borgeet* encapsulates the vision of essential oneness of all entities since it is Hari who is seen as the all-pervading principle. The devotee in Sankardeva's *borgeet* seeks an intimate connection with the deity through chanting their names and singing the praises of their *ishtdeva* instead of following seemingly arid rituals. The one idea common to the *Kirtana-ghosha* and the *borgeet* discussed above is that of essential oneness of all beings underneath the apparent diversity of their phenomenal identities. The metaphysical framework of Advaita Vedanta accords 'reality' only to principle of oneness, namely *brahman*, underlying phenomenal diversity. An attenuation of *ahamkara* (the sense of I-ness) derived from an identification with the body-mind complex follows upon the introversion of the mind of the *bhakta*. Such a model of selfhood is clearly in contradistinction with the one yielded by Freudian psychoanalytic theory that centres on the emergence of the egoic (social) identity.

4. CHANTING GOD'S NAMES: EKA SARANA NAMA DHARMA

The chanting of God's name holds immense importance in the devotional practices of the Hindu traditions. Practices such as *mantra japa* (the chanting of *mantras* such as Om) and *naam japa* (chanting of the names of God) have long been recognised as easily-accessible aids to focus the mind of the seeker on the deity or the *brahman* that is the one abiding principle in all phenomenal reality. Such concentration of the mind is held to eventually ensue in its complete introversion and lead to the goal of *moksha* or self-realisation. Sankardeva's choice of *naam japa* for the cultivation of inwardness is

important also because it does not require any erudition or special qualification to pursue. Following excerpts from Sankardeva's *borgeet* attest to the efficacy of *naam japa*:

"Râma nâma maha nikhila punya raha ohi nigama tattva bânî

Kaliko parama dharama Hari nâma parhi punu marana nâjâni

All merits are embedded in the name of Rama, that is the message of Nigama theories

Hari's name is the ultimate religion of the Kali era" (Borkakoti, 2012, p. 241).

"Bolahu Râma nâmesa mukuti nidânâ Bhava baitaranî,

Taranî sukha saranî,

Nâhi nâhi nâma samânâ

Utter the name of Rama which only gets salvation

Boat to cross the river of mundane life comfortably

There is none like his name" (Borkakoti, 2012, p.203).

One of the most popular stories associated with the devotional practice of *naam japa* is the Puranic story of Hiranyakashipu and Prahlada. This story appears in the *Bhagavata Purana* and Sankardeva had translated the text into the vernacular. Hiranyakashipu, who had become invincible after receiving a boon from Brahma, had a son named Prahlada who was a devotee of Lord Vishnu. As a despotic king given to self-aggrandisement, Hiranyakashipu expressed disapproval of his son's worship of Vishnu and tried to stop him from worshipping the Lord. Despite, and/or ironically because of, his hatred towards Vishnu, Hiranyakashipu kept uttering the Lord's name to express his rejection of the deity. So efficacious is *naam japa* as a devotional practice, the story demonstrates, that even involuntary chanting of God's name can lead to *moksha* or liberation. Hiranyakashipu's liberation comes in the form of his death at the hands of Lord Vishnu in his Narasimha avatar.

5. SANKARDEVA AND RADICAL SPIRITUAL EQUALITY

One of the most contentious features of the Hindu tradition has been the four-fold Varna system with rigid roles prescribed for each Varna. Access to the scriptures within this system was largely confined to the upper castes. The Bhakti traditions across the Indian subcontinent not only made the knowledge traditions contained within the scriptures accessible

to the common people but also witnessed the emergence of modes of personalised devotion unmediated by priests that counteracted the over-emphasis on ritualistic worship. Sankardeva rejects rigid caste hierarchies and asserts the adequacy of individual's devotion for the attainment of liberation. In one of the borgeets, he says:

*Pandite parhe shâstra mâtira, sâra bhakate liye
Antara jala, phutaya kamala, madhu madhukare piye
Yâhe bhakati tâhe mukuti bhakate e tattva jânâ
Yaise banika, chintâmanika jâni, guna bakhânâ
Krishna kinkara Shankara kaha bhaja
Govindara pâve Sohi pandita, sohi mandita, yo Hari
guna gave.*

Following is Borkakoti's translation of this borgeet:

Scholars just read the scriptures, devotees take in the essence

Lotus blooms in the water of heart, devotees drink that nectar

Wherever devotion, there is salvation, devotees know this truth

As traders knowing the philosopher's stone appreciate its merits

Krishna's servant Shankara says worship Govinda's feet

He is scholar, he is glorified, one who sings the glory of Hari (Borkakoti, 2012 p.221).

As the very first line of the *borgeet* suggests, the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma doctrine of Sankardeva focused on taking in the essence of the scriptures by enacting and performing stories from them through the devotional practices of *Sattriya* dance and *Ankiya Naat* apart in addition to reading the texts. Moreover, the translations of the scriptures by Sankardeva allowed for a larger reach of these ancient texts. In Sankardeva's religious sect, everybody could read the holy texts that were not accessible to people from the "lower" castes within mainstream Hindu practices.

A brief discussion of Sankardeva's emphasis on the accessibility of the path of devotion to common people is in order here. Sankardeva writes about his realisation of the futility of difficult and/or esoteric practices to attain the goal of self-realisation. He draws upon his own experience to extol the path of devotion as the means to *moksha* or liberation. Celebrating devotion as "the easy way" as compared to the adherence to rigid rules or performance of tedious rituals, he says:

Dhrung: Ojhâ sojhâ pantha nâheri, koti karama kâi

Hariko nâhi pâi, parala bhava beri beri

Pada: Japa tapa tîritha karasi Gayâ Kâshî bâsî bayasa gowâi

Jâni yoga juguti mati mohita bine bhakati gati nâi

O scholar, you did not see the easy path, performed crores of rituals,

You did not get Hari, embraced mundane life again and again

Chanting penance pilgrimage visit to Gaya Kashi thus squandered your life

Learnt Yoga [made] efforts [retained] thoughts with attachments but no salvation [is

attainable] without devotion (Borkakoti, 2012 p.241)

Many of Sankardeva's *borgeet* trace the trajectory of his devotion to Lord Krishna. According to the hagiographical accounts, Sankardeva went on two pilgrimages during his life. The first one that he seems to have undertaken in 1481, introduced the central ideas of the Bhakti traditions to Sankardeva. The second pilgrimage is believed to have been undertaken in the year 1550. Maheswar Neog mentions Sankardeva's fascination with yogic practices early in his life (Neog, 1965/2021). Both these practices, pilgrimages and *yoga*, prescribed within mainstream Hindu tradition are believed to bring one closer to attaining *moksha* (salvation). However, Sankardeva records his choice of the path of single-minded devotion to the deity as the one that bears fruit the most efficaciously. Following *borgeet* sums up the mature devotee's conclusion on the matter:

Tîritha barata tapa japa yâga yoga yuguti

Mantra parama dharama karama, karata nâhi mukuti

Mâtu pitu patanî tanaya janaya saba maranâ

Sârahu dhandha mânasa andha, dharatu Hari charanâ

Pilgrimage, fasting, penance, chanting, holy fire, yoga, effort, serious ritualistic

performances, all these do not endow salvation

Mother, father, wife, son, friend, all are mortal

Give up worries, O mentally blind, hold the feet of Hari (Borkakoti, 2012 p.212)

One more of the ritualistic practices that Sankardeva criticises consistently is the practice of animal sacrifice that accompanied ritual worship within the *Shakta* traditions. Sankardeva advocates compassion towards all creatures since every creature is verily the body of God:

*Yata jîva jangama kîta patangama aga naga jaga
teri kâyâ*

*Sabakahu mâri pûrata ohi udara nâhi karata bhûta
dâyâ*

*Isha svarupe Hari saba ghate baithaha yaichana
gagana biyâpi*

Nindâ bâda pishuna hingsâ

Hari teri karoho hâmu pâpi

All moving creatures, worms, insects, fixed
vegetations, hills, universe are your body

You fill that belly killing everyone not showing
compassion to the creation

Hari as God resides in all bodies just as the sky is all
pervasive

Condemnation, animosity, devilry, Hari we sinners
perpetrate unto thee

Sankara says fervently be compassionate, Lord so
that I do not give up Rama's name (Borkakoti, 2012
p.173).

6. CONCLUSION

Lakshminath Bezbarua is an important writer of the *Jonaki Era*⁴ of Assamese Literature. Apart from his major contribution in the forms of poetry, short stories, literature for children, and plays, he also wrote two biographies of Sankardeva. The second of these books was about the combined lives of Sankardeva and his first disciple Madhavadeva. In his assessment of the social impact of Srimant Sankardeva's spiritual vision Lakshminath Bezbarua observes, "Sankardeva and Madhavadeva were no visionaries or revolutionaries. Their aim was to purify Hinduism from within" (Neog, 1965/2021 p.360). Sankardeva, on this view, did not set out as a social reformer with an agenda of social change. However, owing to his spiritual vision predicated on the principles of oneness and criticism of arid ritualism, the neo-Vaishnavite movement he founded, paved the way for a more egalitarian ethos in the Assam region. As the sect grew in popularity, Sankardeva's social vision gained greater hold on the imagination of the common people in Assam. Through his *borgeet*, Sankardeva made accessible to the common people complex ideas related to selfhood and self-realisation.

The *borgeet* of Sankardeva offer a glimpse into a popular religious and spiritual tradition of medieval

Assam that sought to realise in the social order the metaphysical vision of oneness of all beings through its rejection of caste-based hierarchies. The proposal of an essential oneness of all beings in their fundamental identity with the *brahman*, is an idea that is central to the Advaita tradition. What is markedly radical about Sankardeva's *borgeet* is that there is a sustained attempt to realise this idea of oneness in the everyday social life and religious practices of the *Sankar Sangh*. The *Sankar Sangh* is also called the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma sect in contemporary Assam and continues to hold a significant influence on the cultural and religious life of the region.

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⁴ *Jonaki Era* (1889-1929) in Assamese literature is considered to be the era of romanticism in the literature of the language. The term *Jonaki* means moonlight in Assamese.

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