



A Study of Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism from Sociological Perspective

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Abstract:

This study examines Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism from a sociological perspective, focusing on its role in shaping religious practice, social relations, and Assamese cultural identity. Emerging in medieval Assam, the movement offered a devotional path centered on 'Bhakti' to Kṛṣṇa and expressed through accessible forms of worship, including congregational singing, drama, and storytelling. It also developed enduring institutions—particularly the Than and Nāmghar—that served as centers of religious instruction, community life, and cultural transmission.

The study explores how Neo-Vaiṣṇavism challenged aspects of ritual complexity and religious exclusivity by emphasizing devotion, ethical conduct, and collective participation. It considers the movement's influence on social cohesion and cultural integration, while also recognizing the ways caste, gender, and institutional authority shaped participation and belonging. By situating Śaṅkaradeva's teachings within their historical and social context, the study argues that Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was not only a religious reform movement but also a significant force in the formation of Assamese society and identity. It concludes that its institutions and cultural practices continue to provide important frameworks for community life in Assam. One of the most significant socio-cultural and religious revivals in Northeast

India's history was the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement in Assam in the fifteenth century, led by the polymath Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva. Although the movement has historically been seen through a hagiographic or theological lens, this paper uses a sociological framework to examine it as a conscious attempt at social engineering. This study examines how Śaṅkaradeva questioned strict caste hierarchies, incorporated various ethnic and tribal groups and promoted a democratic identity by examining the structural and functional elements of indigenous institutions such as the Nāmghar, Thans and Kirtanghars. The study makes the case, using an analytical and historical approach that Neo-Vaiṣṇavism served as a catalyst for social change by substituting an egalitarian framework known as Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma for esoteric ritualism and animal sacrifice. The study comes to the conclusion that the movement's focus on moral behaviour, group involvement and cultural synthesis served as the cornerstone of contemporary Assamese society and provided a strong example of social cohesiveness that endures even now, five centuries later.

Keywords: Devotional, Bhakti Movement, Egalitarianism, Nāmghar, Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva, Social cohesion, Social engineering

1. Introduction

The history of human civilization is often marked by the emergence of "pivotal individuals"—thinkers and reformers who do not merely exist within their time but actively reshape the temporal and social fabric of their world. In the context of Northeast India, specifically the Brahmaputra Valley of the 15th and 16th centuries, that figure was

Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568). His life and work represent more than a religious shift; they signify a "Renaissance" that touched upon every facet of human existence: literature, art, music, dance, and, most importantly, social structure.

Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, or the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*, was the vehicle for this transformation. While traditional Vaiṣṇavism had existed in India for millennia, the "Neo" (New) prefix in the Assamese context is of profound sociological significance. It signifies a movement that moved away from the esoteric, the sacrificial, and the exclusionary, toward the democratic, the egalitarian, and the inclusive. This study, titled **"A Study of Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism from Sociological Perspective,"** seeks to move beyond the hagiographical accounts of the Saint and instead apply a rigorous sociological lens to understand how a religious ideology was engineered to become a tool for social cohesion and justice.

The spiritual and social landscape of Northeast India, particularly the Brahmaputra Valley, was characterized by fragmentation and the dominance of esoteric, exclusionary practices in the 15th century. In addition to a *Brahminical* order that had become more inflexible and ritualistic, the area was a patchwork of various tribal polities, such as the *Ahoms*, *Kacharis*, *Chutias* and *Kochs*. According to M. M. Sharma, "Hinduism has reached today's state after a lot of modification... in the earliest stage, this religion emphasized sacrifice, sometimes animals and even men" (Sharma vii).

Sociologically speaking, the time was right for a "Messiah" to come and solve the masses' alienation. A complex web of *Tantric Shaktism* and pseudo-Buddhism had replaced the "Great Traditions" of Vedic Hinduism, where a select few held exclusive access to religious knowledge systems. The *sanctum sanctorum* did not include the socially and economically oppressed classes. In this context, Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568) emerged as a transformative reformer. He used a philosophical defense of spiritual equality to bring people from all communities together under "one roof" (Saikia 82). His movement redefined the Assamese collective identity through a socio-cultural revolution rather than just a religious revival.

2. Defining the "Neo" in Vaiṣṇavism: A Reformist Turn

Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇavism is referred to as "Neo-Vaiṣṇavism" due to its significant divergence from conventional ritualistic orthodoxy. It simplified spiritual practice into the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*, the religion of seeking refuge in one God through the chanting of His name, while maintaining its roots in the classical Bhakti tradition (devotion to Viṣṇu/Kṛiṣṇa).

This movement was "remarkable for its many-sided contribution to the cultural history of the land," as noted by S.N. Sarma (Sarma xi). Sociologically speaking, the "Neo" means:

1. *Elimination of Ritual Hierarchy*: Congregational singing (Kīrttan) will replace costly priestly rites.
2. *Vernacularization*: Democratizing knowledge by substituting Assamese and Brajāvali for Sanskrit.
3. *Institutional Innovation*: Creating a social and administrative hub at the Nāmghar (Prayer House).

A “purification of Hinduism from within” was made possible by the movement's successful balancing of traditional Vedic principles with practical social realities (Neog, Social Implications 360).

3. Theoretical Framework: Religion as Social Engineering

This study examines Śaṅkaradeva's work through the prisms of structural functionalism and social engineering. According to sociologists such as John W. Bennet and W.E. Ogburn, sociology is the study of “structures and functions of social life.” By constructing a “superstructure” of social stability over the basis of devotional faith, Śaṅkaradeva served as a social engineer. His undertakings comprised: (a) Caste Mitigation: Dispelling the “ugly concept of castes” (Saikia 82); (b) Cultural Integration: Combining regional customs and tribal themes into a single religious practice; (c) Democratic Governance: Using the Nāmghar to establish a non-hierarchical community structure.

4. The Institutions of Assimilation: Nāmghar, Than and Kirtanghars

4.1 The Nāmghar: The Village Parliament

The most unique sociological aspect of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement is the Nāmghar. It is a multi-purpose public space rather than just a temple. The Nāmghar has six main goals, according to sociologists:

1. *Prayer House*: A place for Nāma-Prasāṅga.
2. *Village Court*: An area where disagreements are resolved amicably by consensus.
3. *Village Assembly*: A forum for talking about issues that affect both parties.
4. *Cultural Center*: A theater, dance, and music school.
5. *Museum/Auditorium*: A collection of artwork and live performances.

The Nāmghar promoted a “democratic character” that undermined the established feudal system by providing a common floor where the Brahmin and the “low-caste” sat together (Borkakoti 180).

4.2 The Administrative Hub: Other Social Institutions

The movement's ideological centers were the Thans and the Kirtanghars, both monastic establishments as well as administrative hubs. They offered a secured social framework for education and training in the arts. These social institutions maintained a warp-and-woof relationship with the rural populace by acting as “inseparable organs of Assamese social life” (Deka, Synopsis). They served as hubs for “learning among the common illiterate people,” imparting knowledge of both hygiene and spiritual behavior.

5. The Egalitarian Ethos: Contesting the Caste System

At his core, Śaṅkaradeva was an egalitarian. He realized that the lower classes had no access to wisdom because of

the “ugly concept of casteism” (Saikia 82). There are numerous verses in his writings that support the spiritual worth of the oppressed. He famously wrote in the Kīrtana-Ghoṣā:

“Brāhmaṇa caṇḍālāra nibicāri kula

Dātata corata yena dṛṣṭi ekatula”

(Do not look for the lineage of the Brahmin or the outcaste; look at the giver and the thief with an equal eye.)

The doctrine that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities, which Śaṅkaradeva expressed through verses like-

Kṛṣṇara kathāta yito rasika I

Brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāgai kika II

Smaroka mātra Hari dine rāti I

Nabāṇe bhakati jāti-ajāti” II129 II

(If in Kṛṣṇara kathā a person has deep interest, he need not aspire to be s Brāhmaṇa I birth. Let him only recall Hari day and night. Devotion makes no distinction between cast and uncast)

(Saikia, Purnananda, (2005). Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’s Kīrtan-Ghoṣa . p. 61)

He went on to say that Rama’s soul is housed in even dogs, foxes, and donkeys (*Kukura śṛigāla gardarbhorō ātmā Rām*). An important turning point in Indian social history was the social acceptance of men regardless of their place of birth, which was made possible by this radical humanism. For the first time, those from lower castes who were enlightened by spiritual consciousness were recognized as “Paṇḍitas” (Sanakaradeva, Kirttan 38).

6. Social Cohesion and Ethnic Integration

The geographical and ethnic diversity of Assam created a special difficulty in the process. But, the genius of Śaṅkaradeva was found in his “inclusive theology”. Instead of using force to “Aryanize” the local tribes, he welcomed them into a common cultural community. This diversity is reflected in his inner circle of disciples: (a) Govinda (from Garo tribe), (b) Paramānanda (From Miri/Mishing tribe), (c) Narottama (from the Naga community, (d) Jayarāma (from Bhutiya tribe), (e) Candsāi (from Muslim community). By fostering a “national identity” based on shared cultural customs rather than a common race, this pluralistic approach avoided conflicts between communities (Deka, Synopsis). He was the “Messiah” who came to save the oppressed and bring about “truth and social justice”, according to Purnananda Saikia (Saikia 82).

7. Cultural Renaissance: Using Literature and Theater as Teaching

7.1 Bhāonā and Aṅkiyā Nāt

Śaṅkaradeva employed the arts as a means of social mobilization. He created the *Bhāonā* performance and the *Aṅkiyā Nāt* (one-act plays). *Chihna-yātrā*, the first of these plays, told spiritual tales through music and images. According to sociology, artists used these performances to elevate their “social status”. The development of professional surnames based on these arts, such as *Gāyan*, *Bāyan*, *Borbāyan*, and *Pāthak*, demonstrates how the movement established new social categories based on skill and service as opposed to inherited caste (Medhi 24).

7.2 Literature Vernacularization

Language barriers were broken by Śaṅkaradeva, who translated the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and wrote the *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā*. Access to the scriptures in their mother tongue empowered the common people, who were “completely ignorant and helpless and lived in constant fear” (Medhi 24). In order to develop Assamese social consciousness, this “vernacularization” process was essential.

8. The Social Engineer's Revolutionary Role

Because they opposed the “feudal kings and Tantric priests”, Śaṅkaradeva's actions were deemed “revolutionary” (Deka, Synopsis). In medieval Assam, he reinterpreted the “Social Contract”. He suggested a society that founded on *Bhakti* and *Nam-Dharma* as an alternative to one based on the “wrath of gods and kings”.

He spoke about the “malaise of the then society” which was the misinterpretation of scripture by some members of the priesthood for their personal benefits. The “evils of untouchability are unknown in this part of the country” because of Śaṅkaradeva's teachings, according to Mahatma Gandhi, who famously praised this aspect of Assamese culture (Rajkhowa 205).

9. A Contemporary Study of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism as a Social Change Catalyst

From the standpoint of modern sociology, Neo-Vaiṣṇavism functioned as:

1. *A Unifying Force*: Crossing boundaries between tribes and non-tribes.
2. *An Agent of Moral Order*: Promoting “Sādhutā” (saintly conduct) and dispelling superstitions.
3. *A Cultural Bedrock*: supplying the Assamese soul's scripts, dances, and musical ragas.

The movement sparked a “spiritual awakening within society” and promoted “social cohesion by uniting diverse groups”. Assamese society is still closely associated with this movement even after five centuries.

10. Conclusion

From a sociological standpoint, studying Śrīmantānākaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is a master class in community development and social reform. Śaṅkaradeva was more than just a religious preacher; he was a visionary who understood that a society's ability to survive depends on its egalitarian spirit and internal unity. He empowered the average person and decentralized religious authority by establishing organizations like the Nāmghar.

His movement replaced "blood sacrifice" with the "sacrifice of the ego" through *Bhakti*. He has tried to integrate the hills and the plains, the Brahmin and the outcaste, into a single thread of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. As this research concludes, the contributions of Śaṅkaradeva in the fields of religion, language, and culture are "incomparable". He was the "pioneer of the socio-religious movement of Medieval Assam", whose socialist speculations and democratic spirit are more relevant in the present day rather than ever before. To understand the Assamese race is to understand the sociological footprints of Śaṅkaradeva.

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