



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

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-cultural dimensions of Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, a significant religious reform movement originating in 15th-century Assam. Through a sociological lens, the research examines how Śaṅkaradeva's teachings and practices influenced societal structures, community cohesion, and individual identity. The study analyzes the movement's role in promoting social harmony, challenging existing hierarchical norms, and fostering a collective religious consciousness among followers. By investigating the interplay between religious ideology and social change, the research highlights Neo-Vaiṣṇavism's impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Assamese society and its enduring relevance in contemporary times. This sociological perspective provides a nuanced understanding of how religious movements can serve as catalysts for social transformation and cohesion.

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: Cohesion, *Bhakti Movement*, *Egalitarianism*, *Nāmghar*, *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism*, *Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva*, *social cohesion*, *social engineering*.

1. Introduction

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 Śrīmanata Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism from Sociological Perspective," seeks to move beyond the hagiographical accounts

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, *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva* (1449–1568) emerged as a transformative reformer.

2. Defining the “Neo” in Vaiṣṇavism: A Reformist Turn

Sociologically, Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is defined as a "Systemic Reform Movement" and a "Counter-Hegemonic Force." It was a move from "Ritualistic Individualism" to "Congregational Collectivism." Unlike traditional Vaiṣṇavism, which often existed within the existing caste framework, Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism acted as a "Social Leveler." It shifted the "Symbolic Capital" from the hands of the priestly elite to the common masses. Sociologically, it is the birth of the Assamese Public Sphere, where religious identity replaced ethnic and tribal divisions to create a unified social fabric. It is an "inclusive social system" that prioritized the "Dignity of the Individual" over the "Hierarchy of the Birth."

Religion preached by Śaṅkaradeva is called Neo-Vaiṣṇavism because it represents a revival and reform of traditional Vaiṣṇavism in India, emphasizing devotion (Bhakti) to Lord Viṣṇu (particularly in his form as Kṛṣṇa) in a new, accessible way.

Key reasons include:

- **Revival of Bhakti Tradition:** Śaṅkaradeva revitalized the Bhakti Movement in Assam, promoting love and devotion over ritualistic practices and caste distinctions.
- **New Interpretations and Practices:** He simplified religious practices, introduced congregational singing (kīrtana), and emphasized personal devotion, making spirituality accessible to all, regardless of caste or social status.
- **Regional Adaptation:** While rooted in classical Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva's teachings incorporated local culture, language (Assamese language prevailing at that time), and traditions, creating a distinct regional form of Vaiṣṇavism.
- **Reform and Continuity:** Neo-Vaiṣṇavism aimed to purify and reform existing religious practices, aligning them more closely with the core principles of devotion and love for Kṛṣṇa.

Thus, "Neo" signifies the revival and reformist nature of Śaṅkaradeva's movement within the broader Vaiṣṇava tradition, establishing a new, vibrant form of devotional practice in Assam.

Mādhavadeva, he chief disciple of Śrīmanānta Śāṅkaradeva named it as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. in his *Girubhatima*. Mādhavadeva wrote-

Bhakati bhāṇḍāra dvāra sava choḍi
Mukuti kayali udāsa |
Eka Śaraṇa Hari nāma dharamkahu
Rājā koru parakāśa || 15 ||

(Chutia, Soanaram & others, (2015) Ed. Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva Bākṃyāmṛt, p.202)

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/Kṛṣṇa).



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 caṇḍālara nibicāri kula
Dātata corata yena dr̥ṣṭi ekatula*”

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

He went on to say that Rama's soul is housed in even dogs, foxes, and donkeys (*Kukura śṛigāla gardarbhoro 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 Bhutiyā 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 Śrīmantānāṅkaradeva'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.

The sociological study of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism concludes that the movement was a "Systemic Reform" that redefined the DNA of the Assamese people. From a sociological perspective, Śaṅkaradeva remains the supreme example of a "Polymath as a Social Engineer." He recognized that the 15th-century "surrounding gloom"—a state of *Anomie* characterized by tribal fragmentation, feudal tyranny, and ritualized violence—could only be resolved through a "Total Social Transformation."

It is a matter of great pleasure that William L. (W.L.) Smith, a distinguished Indologist, is renowned for bringing the literary and spiritual brilliance of the 15th-century Assamese saint-poet Śaṅkaradeva to the international stage. He has extensively analyzed and translated Śaṅkaradeva's pioneering medieval plays and poetry, highlighting their profound theology and cultural significance.

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