

PLACE OF NEO-VAISNAVITE  
MOVEMENT OF ASSAM IN  
BHAKTI MOVEMENT OF INDIA:  
A HISTORICAL COMPARISON



*Edited by*

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# **Impact Of Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement In Assam: A Comparative Study of Sankardeva's Brahman And Brahman of Sankaracharya**

**Dr. Mayuri Barman\***

## **INTRODUCTION :**

The neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardev not only brought about a transformation in the religion life of the Assamese people but also heralded the advent of a socio-cultural renaissance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Assam. As in the rest of the country, the faith and practice of religion in Assam was riddled with rituals, ceremonies and superstitious amidst ugly discriminations of caste and creed. But by dint of his noble catholic outlook and arduous zeal, Sankardeva had shown the seed of democracy in the fields of religions, society and culture in Assam 500 yrs ago before the rest of the world could not even dream of the democratic values.

Assam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. Bringing all these diverse communities and warring factions under a systematic religions code and conduct of life and to provide the masses with mode of worship, which would be simple and at the same time accessible to all was what constituted the pressing need of the time. Against this backdrop, Sankardeva appeared on the scene as a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer and a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of

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given a path to social life of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaisnavite movement are (i) God (iii) the fraternity of Bhaktas (devotees) and Nam.

Sankardeva's philosophical and religious theories on 'Bhagavata Purna' and the 'Bhagavat Gita'. According to the experts of Vaisnavism, the philosophical teachings of 'Purana' are quite close to that of 'Sankaracharya'. Hence, in this paper an attempt has been made to examine Sankardeva's Brahman with Brahman of Sankaracharya – the great Vedantist of Indian philosophy.

**Brahman** : It is true that 'Brahman' is the main theme of all the Vedantic text. So, Sankaracharya holds the Brahman is the target of all knowledge and meditation. Brahman is the highest being in the Upanishads. It is said that Brahman becomes the world in order to obtain an objective view of itself. Similarly Brahman becomes God in reference to 'maya'. When Brahman becomes God, He becomes the Lord of the universe, himself and the creator of the world.

In Sankardeva Brahman stands as the impersonal supreme. This Brahman is without form. But we ascribe to Him a form for the purpose of devotion. The formless and attributeless Brahman assumes different forms through His own 'maya'. Thus, Sankardeva is also in agreement with Sankaracharya that 'Maya' is the creative power of Brahman through which the world is projected. He wants to concentrate his mind on the non-dual Brahman. God. In his 'Kirtana Ghosa' Sankardeva has says:

"Tumi Paramatma Jagatara isa eka-  
eko vastu nahike tomata vyatireka-  
tumi karya-karara samaste caracara-  
suvarna kundale vena nahike antara-

**Meaning:** You are one in the world. There is nothing different of all the worlds of living. There is no difference between cause and effect between gold and gold.

**METHODS:** The study is based on journals, secondary books and articles.

**RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS:**

**SANKARDEVA:**

Sankardeva admits that Brahman is the cause of all existence. He performs Kirtana with obeisance to Brahman and is the cause of all existence. Sankardeva's 'Kirtana Ghosa' is a description of Brahman as he says:

"Prathama Prarthana  
Sarva avastha  
Taju Navi  
Juge juge A"

**Meaning:** First of all, in the form of 'Brahman'. Like Sankaracharya, Sankardeva holds that Brahman is the ultimate cause of the universe. 'Paramartha', 'Bhagavan', 'Isvara' and 'Man', 'Isvara' and 'Man' are different terms of the relation between the whole and its parts or the cause and effect (Bhakta / devotee)

Sankardeva applies the same relation of Isvara and devotee.



**Meaning:** You are the supreme soul, the only God of the world. There is nothing except you. You are the cause and effect of all the worlds of living and non-living things. There is no difference between cause and effect as there is no difference between gold and gold ornaments.

**METHODS:** The study is completely based on original books, journals, secondary books and internet surfing.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: BRAHMAN AND WORLD: COMPARISON WITH SANKARACHARYA: SANKARDEVA:**

Sankardeva admits of one Supreme Reality. He begins his Kirtana with obeisance to the Supreme Lord who assumes forms and is the cause of all incarnations. In the very first pada of Sankardeva's 'Kirtana Ghosa' we find the identification of Brahman as he says:

*"Prathama Pranama brahma-rupa sanatana÷  
Sarva avatarara karana narayana÷÷  
Taju Navi Kamalat Brahma Bhaila Jat÷  
Juge juge Auatara Dhara Asankhyata÷÷"* 3

**Meaning:** First of all, I bow down to Narayana, the Eternal one, in the form of 'Brahma', the cause of all incarnations.

Like Sankaracharya, Sankardeva also accepted Brahman as the ultimate cause of this world and has given different names like 'Paramartha', 'Bhagawata' etc to it. The relation between God and Man, Isvara and Jiva is often spoken of by Sankardeva in terms of the relation that exists between fire and its sparks, a whole and its parts or relation between master and its servant (Bhakta / devotee)

Sankardeva applies the analogy of fire and its sparks to the relation of Isvara and Jiva. Just as a spark is a part of the fire,

similarly Jiva is the part of the Lord (Brahman). Thus Sankaradeva also admits that the world and the individuals are parts of God.

*"Krisnaresa amsa save*

*Jagata miscaya;*

*Visnu-amsa jiva"*<sup>4</sup>

**Meaning:** All are parts of Brahman.

One important aspect on which is given emphasis by Sankaradeva is that the Jivas as part not only emanate from Brahman but also controlled by Him. In other words, God is the inner controller. The doctrine of inner controller has its growth in the Upanishads. In the 'Brhadaranyaka Upanishad' it is written -

"He ..... who controls the earth from within, he is your self the inner controller, the immortal."<sup>5</sup>

The analogy of the whole and part relation has been used by Sankaradeva only to indicate that Brahman and individual Jivas are basically non-different. The world which appears as real to the ignorant is actually an illusion i.e. due to Maya. Maya is an illusion producing ignorance. Maya conceals the real nature of Brahman and makes Him appear as something else, that is, the world.

So, one who calls God to be dual is an ignorant person as Sankaradeva says:

*Mayatese Dekhoi Bibidha Parisad÷*

*Svarupat Tumar Nahika Kisu Bhed÷÷*

*Caitanya svarupe vyapioka niranjana÷*

*Tomaka bulibe dvaita kona ajna jana÷÷*<sup>6</sup>

**Meaning:** Dualism of God is due to Maya and we an ignorant person calls God be dual.

**SANKARACHARYA :**



in the vaisnava movement of Sankardeva. For him service of humanity is the best way of serving God. The spirit of humanity is inherent in this religious movement. To induce the people of Assam to turn their attention to God he has introduced 'Kirtana' i.e., the singing the name of God in choras along with the accompaniment of musical instruments. In 'Kirtana Ghosa' Sankardeva says

*"Hari Name Kalpe Arthavad÷  
Namar Mahima Kare Ussed÷÷  
Namat Bale Kare Paap Buddhi÷÷"* <sup>10</sup>

**Meaning:** One who does 'Nam kirtan' can get the ultimate truth'.

Thus His philosophy of devotion and love has universal appeal and as such people from all castes are attracted towards it. The religion of Sankardeva has given hope and inspiration to the masses of Assam. In fact, it is the true religion of the masses which gives opportunity to everybody for self-transcendence in the spiritual sphere.

In this matter Dr. B.K. Kakati has said:

"Sankardeva has given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdom perished in the dust, but Sankardeva's state endures and broad in the general heart of men his power survives."<sup>11</sup>

From whatever little we have said about Sankardeva and his works, we may conclude that although he lived and preached about 500 years ago, his teachings have great relevance to the present day society. His vision of peaceful life within a cohesive and harmonious society should be the ideal before us, and we should all join hands together to achieve such an ideal society. Modern man suffers from stress and strains to gain material progress. What the modern man needs to-day is the management

of minds for peaceful existence, because when the mind is under stress violence and other evil behaviours will follow and there will be no harmony in the society. So, in order to do away with the ills of the present day society and to give solace to our own disturbed mind, we should take care of our moral and spiritual upliftment by following the spiritual path shown by him.

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## Footnotes

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- 2 Kirtan Ghosa, Chapter Haramohana, Pg 130 'Second Ghosa 520'
- 3 Kirtana Ghosa, Chapter Saturbankhati Avatar', P.1, Pratham Ghosa
- 4 Bhagavata Purana II, V, 651
- 5 Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (III 7.3)
- 6 Kirtana Ghosa, Chapter 'Uresa Varrana', P. 549
- 7 S.N.L. Shrivastava, Samkara and Bradley A comparative & critical study P. 44
- 8 Datta & Chatterjee, An Introduction to Indian Philosophy, chapter The Vedanta Philosophy
- 9 Brahma-sutra 2.1.9 and Sankaracharya
- 10 Kirtan Ghosa, chapter 'Namaparadh', Pg. 93
- 11 Dr. B.K. kakati, Mother Goddess Kamakhya, P.87