

## Creative Humanism in the Philosophy of Sankaradeva

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Dr. Sangita Bora

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Nowgong College (A)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4658-7526>

Gitika Borah

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Nowgong College (A)

E-mail: [borahgitika27@gmail.com](mailto:borahgitika27@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6978-2664>

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**Abstract:** *Sankaradeva, the man who laid the foundation of modern Assam, based his contributions on spiritualism, scientific religion, social reformation and a secular outlook. He developed a unique concept of humanism, emphasizing oneness, equality, non-discrimination and universal brotherhood. He was not a saint who “led a purely intellectual life, with the equanimity of his mind scarcely disturbed by bereavements and other worldly woes” (Barman, 2008: 14). Rather, he was a devotee who dedicated his life to human welfare. Sankaradeva was born during a transitional period when every nook and corner of*

*Assam was in a deplorable social state, plagued by discrimination, superstition and inequality. He saved and reshaped Assam, earning him the title 'Jagat Guru' (world teacher). He challenged all forms of societal classifications and divisions and preached universal brotherhood. He propagated 'Ek Saran Nam Dharma' to foster humanism and universalism.*

*Sankaradeva's humanism is a form of creative humanism. Creative humanism embraces the ideology of unity in diversity and recognizes the boundless possibilities and dimensions of the spirit that regulate human life. Sankaradeva's philosophy is grounded in Krishna bhakti (worship of Lord Krishna), the spirit that governs an individual's life, mind and body. According to him, everyone must have the right to offer their devotion to Krishna (the Spirit). This paper seeks to explore the creative humanism of Srimanta Sankaradeva that shaped the foundation of modern Assamese society.*

Key Words: Creative humanism, spiritualism, universalism, religion

**Introduction:** Sankaradeva was born during a period of great socio-political turmoil in Assam. At that time, Assam was shrouded in the darkness of ignorance and superstition. People believed in multiple gods and spirits, such as *Ban Kunwari*, *Jal Devata*, *Ban Devata*, *Daini*, *Jakhini* and *Burha Dangaria*. To appease these spirits during sickness, people sacrificed pigeons and even kumura (ash gourd). The practice of human sacrifice to please deities also became widespread during this period. A class known as '*Bhogis*' volunteered to offer themselves as sacrifices before the deity. Sankaradeva sought to reform society entirely through a simple religion, which led to the establishment of '*Ek Saran Nam Dharma*'. He aimed to address the social needs of his time.

Sankaradeva was an intellectual, a visionary, a versatile genius, a social reformer, a capable administrator, a spiritual guru to millions, an artist, a litterateur and a celebrated scholar. He was a linguist with a

profound knowledge of not only Assamese but also Sanskrit, Prakrit, Brajavali and Maithili, among other languages. Additionally, he was an educationist, a musical maestro and an actor-cum-playwright. An ardent supporter of secularism and a casteless society, he worked tirelessly to unite people of diverse races, tribes and religions. Sankaradeva embodied a rare combination of these virtues and qualities, earning him the rightful title of ‘Sarvagunakara’ (the repository of all virtues).

This paper is an attempt to understand and explore the elements of creative humanism found in the philosophy of Sankaradeva. The paper uses both analytical and descriptive method with the help of available secondary sources in this area. Reference books in Assamese as well as English language, edited books, journals, research articles have been used in this paper.

### **Creative humanism in Sankaradeva’s philosophy:**

Humanism refers to the belief in humans over any supernatural being. According to Devaraja, creative humanism is “a man-centred philosophy that considers creativity to be the dominant and most significant characteristic of human beings.”

Sankaradeva’s philosophy was profoundly pro-human. He developed a religious order that was simple and accessible, known as *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*. This religion blended humanity and spirituality, emphasizing that worshipping God and serving people pave the path to human welfare. Sankaradeva embodied humanity in every aspect of his life. Equality, fraternity, impartiality, positivity and kindness formed the core pillars of his humanistic approach. He envisioned a society where people of all castes, creeds and religions could assimilate harmoniously. By promoting the Bhakti movement, he sought to eradicate social evils like the caste system, uniting people through devotion.

Sankaradeva’s humanism fostered a constructive spirit among individuals for both collective and individual well-being. Creative humanism, as reflected in his philosophy, aims to serve humanity inclusively. It promotes love among people without discrimination based on caste, class, creed or religion. Sankaradeva used his creative works to instil values of love, brotherhood and equality in society.

He built a societal structure that embraced so-called ‘low-caste’ individuals who were marginalized by higher castes. The story of Sati Radhika and her husband Purnananda serves as a remarkable example of his concern for both lower-class people and women. Sankaradeva entrusted Sati Radhika with the responsibility of constructing a bank over the Tembuvani ravine to prevent flooding. While men’s efforts failed, Sati Radhika succeeded, paving the way for women’s empowerment. (Borkakoti,2012:52)

Sankaradeva’s philosophy reflects creative humanism in numerous ways, including his faith in human values, service to humankind, universal brotherhood, belief in one ultimate reality and commitment to secular ethics (Sharma, 2017, pp. 5-8). His neo-Vaishnavite movement was a reformatory effort to transform the existing social order and uplift humanity through creativity. He propagated *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*, a religion centred on supreme surrender to one God (Vishnu), to liberate society from socio-religious evils. This religion emphasized equality, asserting that all people, as creations of one God (Vishnu), deserve equal treatment. According to Sankaradeva, nothing exists without God, and everything is created and sustained by Vishnu. Through his teachings, he promoted peace amid social turmoil, replaced hatred with love and encouraged faith over fear.

Sankaradeva believed in equality and treated everyone with equal dignity. At a time when the Assamese society was steeped in ignorance and superstition, he sought to reform the social structure and uplift the downtrodden—socially, economically and spiritually. His ultimate aim was to achieve universal brotherhood.

He dreamt of a society full with love and devotion. He established harmony and unity among the people of different communities. The humanism preached by him believed that all human beings are equal irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Hence, he said-

*Nahi bhakatitat jati- ajativichara,*

*Krishnatu bhakti samsatareadhi karma I*

(Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva Vakya mrta, 1998)

(there is no distinction of caste and everybody has equal rights to chant the *Hari Nama*)

One of the key elements of Sankaradeva's humanism was non-violence. He sought to establish peace and harmony in the society, based on human values. He envisioned a society rooted in non-exploitation, fostering a multi-ethnic community. Sankaradeva propagated his religion through painting, sculpture, art and music, emphasizing the purity of the human mind. He believed that love for others—both humans and animals—is the greatest asset of the human heart. All animals should be treated equally, and discrimination based on lower or upper caste and class should be abolished. He encouraged people to rise above arrogance.

Sankaradeva wrote:

*Jatajivajangama*

*kitapatangama*

*Aganaga jaga teri kanya*

(Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva Vakya mrta, 1998)

Sankaradeva strove for unity among all sections of the society. His humanism encompassed equality for all living beings, not just humans. He treated all living beings with the same dignity, believing that every living being—whether man or woman, high caste or low caste, dog or jackal—possesses the same soul, derived from the Supreme Being.

*"Xakalapranikadekhibekaatmasam*

*Kukura srigalagardabharoatmarama*

*Janiya savakoparikaribapranama"*

(Kirtan ghosa /1825)

*Krishna parama deva*                      *krishnakakariyu seva*

*Krishnatasarvadadiamati*

*Asehiridipathamaje*                      *isharakrshnatabaje*

*Ano kuna devedibogati*                      (Bhagawata 6/5337)

Sankaradeva taught us the value of oneness among all human beings. He propagated a scientific approach to religion and opposed unscientific beliefs. He believed in a single religion and the worship of one God, Vishnu. He concentrated on the unification of all castes and religions under a common framework. His ideology is bagged with inclusivity, harmony and unity.

He raised the voice against animal slaughter. He wrote-

*Dasa maha makhi juka puka paruware I*

*Ishare nirmila britti rudhire amara II*

*Piyante gawara teja taka jiyu mare I*

*Pare xitu naraandhakupaandakare II* (SrimadBhagavata,2000)

According to Sankaradeva, we should not harm others, not even the smallest of creatures. He was such a staunch advocate of non-violence that he advised people against killing mosquitoes. He believed that everyone has the right to live. Sankaradeva judged everything based on democratic principles and a spirit of tolerance. He established Namghars to foster unity among people and to eliminate the practice of untouchability. He introduced a liberal and creative humanistic approach in Assam for the first time. In his view, it is unnecessary to harm people or animals, and the killing of any living being is considered a sin.

He opposed all kind of sacrifices offered to God. He wrote...

*Nrisimha bolanta hasisunio prahlada*

*Dibaka nalage to isavaprasada*

*Parama vaisnava tai putrabhailiyara*

*Ekaispurusa tara karil iuddara*

*Yaitathake mora bhakta udharacaraitra*

*Kita –patangakotathakariyapabitra*

*Nakararepraanikahinsanahiekosparha*

*Amata arpanakaraeapunaradeha*

(Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva Vakya mrta, 1998)

It alludes to the strong dedication to God by a Bhakta who even dedicates his body to God and never harbours any envious feeling towards any living thing. These teachings of Sankardeva had two objectives, namely to prevent human sacrifice and virgin worshipping (Borkakoti, 2012:49). Sankardeva advocated for the sole worship of lord Krishna while not indulging in the inhumane act of animal-sacrifice, for Krishna only seeks devotion from His followers (Ibid).

Sankardeva, with the help of *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*, dreamt of establishing a society where everyone will be equal without the division of caste, class and religion. In Kirtan Ghosha he wrote-

*Brāhmanara chandālara nibichāri kula*

*Dātāta chorata yena dristi eka tula*

*Nichata sād’huta yāra bhaila eka jnāna*

*Tāhākese pandita buliyo sarbajana*

*(Kirttana-ghoshā / 1822)*

He urged the people not to consider the *kula* or caste of someone while dealing with them; rather to treat everyone equally. According to him a true scholar is the one who does not differentiate between a Brahmana and a *Chandala* (an outcaste group or individual).

The socio-religious institutions like the Satra and Namghar, established by Sankaradeva, pioneered a creative approach to spreading humanism in Assamese society. The Satra and Namghar played a significant role in promoting education through cultural means. These institutions taught people the true essence of life and essential survival skills. They provided a platform for individuals from all sections of society to come together, cooperate, and break down barriers erected by social divisions. The extensive use of creative mediums such as drama, song, dance and art were remarkably ahead of its time.

Sankaradeva brought about a cultural revolution in Assam. He utilized literature, art, culture and a scientific approach to religion to drive this transformation. People, irrespective of caste, creed, or religion, became part of this revolution. His religion evolved into a faith for the common people, leaving no room for superstition, discrimination, intolerance or injustice. It illuminated human consciousness through universal love and spirituality. Sankaradeva developed a new ideology and philosophy through forms like Borgeet (celestial songs), Ankiya Naat (drama) and Satriya Dance, fostering devotion to one God, Vishnu, rooted in the principles of equality and humanism.

He cultivated a devotional faith that enhanced unity and connected with human minds. This faith generated an emotional sense of bonding, dismantling the walls of class distinction. The Namghars and Satras he established were dedicated to human welfare, opening the minds and eyes of people and deeply influencing their hearts with human and moral values. Sankaradeva believed in the positive energy and



capability of every individual. Despite numerous challenges, he devoted his entire life to the moral development and welfare of society. He followed the path of Bhakti to connect with the one God, seeking salvation. Through his teachings, he instilled a sense of humanity to inspire people to reform society.

### **Conclusion:**

Sankaradeva's goal was to reconstruct Assamese society and liberate Assam from the social, political and economic evils prevalent at the time. Reforming and restructuring society during such a turbulent period was a monumental task. Awakening the ignorant and illiterate masses was another challenge before Sankaradeva. He employed a creative humanist approach to address these evils. The methods and tools Sankaradeva used to combat these issues were far ahead of his time. His intellect and vision in engaging with the ignorant masses are commendable. He forged a new path for these people, guiding them toward shaping a better society. Sankaradeva's philosophy blends both spiritualism and pragmatism which built the foundation of modern Assamese society.

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