

**The *Eka-sarana* Dharma of Sankaradeva:**  
**The Greatest Expression of Assamese Spiritual Outlook**

**Suniti Kumar Chatterji**

The greatest name in early Assamese literature is that of **Sankaradeva**, and he has left his stamp on Assamese literature and culture, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a poet and saint, religious teacher and social reformer all in one, and his influence on Assamese life and literature is comparable to that of Tulasidasa for the people of the Upper Gangetic Valley (speakers of Braj and other Western Hindi, of Awadhi and other Kosali dialects, and even the Bhojpuri, Magadhi and Maithil speakers). Sankaradeva is said to have lived for the uncommon span of 120 years: Assamese tradition places his birth in the year 1449 A.D., and his death in 1568 A.D. (Similarly, another great saint and mystic and poet of Medieval India, Kabir, is said to have lived also for 120 years - 1398 to 1518 A.D.). He became a widower four years after his marriage in 1473 at the age of 23, and he had a daughter by this marriage whom he married off at proper age (His son-in-law was later beheaded by the order of a persecuting Ahom king). Then in 1483 A.D, in his 34<sup>th</sup> year, he started on a 12 years' grand tour of all the holy places of Hindudom in North India. After having visited Puri, Gaya, Sitakunda (near Munger), Banaras, Prayaga or Allahabad, Ayodhya, Brindavan and Mathura, Dwaraka, Badarikasrama and Varahakunda (?), he returned home after 12 years and then married a second time. He had three sons by this marriage.

Sankaradeva was well-educated in Sanskrit, and he composed one important work in the sacred language, the *Bhakti-ratnakara*, which was translated into Assamese verse by Ramacarana Thakura, a younger contemporary of Sankaradeva. He raised Assamese literature to a very high level of excellence by his songs and hymns and his dramas and works on Vaishnava religion and practice. Before his time, the religious life in Assam

appears to have been at a very low ebb. The people, Brahmans and the masses, were mostly Saktas and their religion was largely an attempt to propitiate the dread Mother Goddess by offering sacrifices of animals, and sometimes of human beings to her. There was very little of the spiritual in these cults and practices which were based on the Sakta *Tantras*. Sankaradeva brought to the people of Assam the message of faith in the One Lord, who was Vishnu. He was uncompromisingly monotheistic, arguing that since Vishnu was All-God, there was no point in offering special worship to the other manifestations of the Divinity which were conceived as the various gods and goddesses of Hinduism. From this, the doctrine that he preached was called the ***Eka-sarana Dharma*** - “the religion of taking refuge with the One God only.”

Naturally this went counter to the spirit of traditional Brahmanism based on the notions of caste and of worship through the various manifestations of the Deity. Sankaradeva preached also the equality of men before God, and abjured the idea of special privileges for Brahmans. Himself a non-Brahman, being born into a respectable Sudra family, he started the innovation of giving special spiritual ministrations to Brahmans also, and this scandalized the orthodox. The hostility of the Brahmans, and the indifference of the Ahom kings and sometimes their cruelty due to their fear of revolutionary doctrines upsetting the equilibrium of the state –Sankaradeva’s own son-in-law was beheaded at the order of the Ahom king Su-hung-mung - made him leave his homeland near the town of Nowgong within Ahom territory and seek asylum with the Koch Bihar king Naranarayana who was a rival of the Ahom king and was one of the greatest rulers in Eastern India - quite a worthy contemporary of great Mogul emperor Akbar - his vast territory in Eastern India embracing the greater part of North Bengal, Western Assam, East Bengal including Tippera and probably as far as Arracan, making him worthy of being designated as an Emperor of Eastern India.

Sankaradeva was enabled to preach the new faith he had established for himself and for earnest seekers in his province, basing it on the philosophical doctrines of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* as its scriptures, on the new interpretation of the **Name of God** (*nama*) and singing His praise (*kirtana*) in congregational worship, and

finally on an absolute and complete surrender of oneself to the will of the Lord. This was certainly a purer and a more spiritual form of religion than what the Sakta cults with their cruelty of bloodshed and the semi Hinduised animistic religion of Mongoloid masses could offer. Besides, it had behind it not only the force of the Ancient Scriptures like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, but was in line with the religious movements that were going strong over the greater part of North India - movements which had both sail and ballast, in having elements both from the ancient *Bhakti* philosophy centering round the worship of Vishnu (particularly in his two incarnations of Rama and Krishna) and from the Sufistic notions and practices which combined with the old Hindu worship of *Nirguna* or attributeless Deity and gave rise to the various monotheistic and reforming schools of neo-Hinduism, like the *Sant cults* of Kabir and others, and Sikhism of Guru Nanak.

Sankaradeva founded the *Sattra* or Monastery at Patbausi near Barpeta to be the centre of his missionary work and a more important centre for the faith was set up at Barpeta by his disciple Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva was not a celibate himself and he wanted men and women to live normal lives. He was a Sudra householder, but his greatest disciple who took over the leadership of his followers was also Kayastha like his master and he remained a celibate all his life - **Madhavadeva** (1489-1596).

Sankaradeva found in the Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Sukladhvaja (alias Cila Ray) good friends and patrons - Cila Ray in fact married a niece of Sankaradeva. After establishing his mission and his reformed faith, when very old, in 1552 he undertook another pilgrimage, both to Puri and to religious centres in North India. It is not likely that during his first pilgrimage he met the Bengal reformer Chaitanya, whose position in Bengal was analogous to that of Sankaradeva in Assam; Chaitanya had not yet taken to the saffron garb of the Hindu monk. It is also just possible that Sankaradeva met Kabir, but there is no positive proof.

There are points of agreement between the *Eka-sarana Dharma* of Sankaradeva

on the one hand and contemporary Vaishnavism of South India as well as the North Indian *Sant* Schools or sects. It is quite remarkable how Sankaradeva's *Eka-sarana* faith concentrated on the *dasya* aspect of devotion to God, which conceived of man's relationship to God as that of a faithful slave to his Master. According to the Bengal Vaishnava tradition, Chaitanya's *Bhakti* or faith in God was on the basis of another kind of relationship - that of love - the *madhura-bhava* or self-forgetting love of a married woman (*parakiya* or "another man's wife") for a lover which would impel her in her abandon of intense attachment to make light of everything that a good wife holds dear in life. These are of course figures of speech or examples to indicate the type of personal relationship favoured by the devotee towards his God. God was worshipped as a personal deity in His essential nature as the Lord of the Universe, and there was no insistence on His dual nature as His *Sakti* or Energy, or Power, which makes His Godhead effective in the Universe. Poetry and Mythology have conceived the Godhead in Its essential nature as *Purusa* or the Male, and the Energy or Might of the Godhead as *Sakti* or *Prakriti*, the Force which is also Matter, as the Female Complement or Counterpart of the Male as His Wife. The *Eka-sarana* faith worships only Vishnu, either as Vishnu or through His incarnations Krishna or Rama, acknowledging of course the figure of Sri or Sita, but never thinking of *Sakti* aspect as inseparable and worthy of the same honour or worship as the essential *Purusa* aspect of the Divinity. The amoral and antisocial ideal of the figure of the *parakiya* has always had the risk of bringing in eroticism and even moral turpitude and this was carefully avoided by Sankaradeva.

During his long life, there were six great contemporaries of **Sankaradeva** in the religious world of India - **Chaitanya** of Bengal (1485-1533), **Vallabhacharya** of Andhra and Vrajamandala (1479-1531), **Kabir** of Banaras (1398-1518), **Nanak** of the Punjab (1469-1539) and **Tulasidasa** in the United Provinces (? 1523-1623). Sankaradeva's *Eka-sarana Dharma* or *Mahapurusa* Sect as it is also called agreed more with the robust and manly path favoured by Kabir and Nanak and later by Tulasidasa: it was the path of a man's straightforward faith in his Master, without his assuming the nature of a woman. It was also democratic in its nature, inculcating communal worship with as simple a ritual as possible.

The *Eka-sarana Dharma* of Sankaradeva deserved to be better known in other parts of India, but each area developed its own form of a common pan-Indian Vaishnava religion of faith in a loving God, and this, coupled with Assam's isolation, probably prevented a wider spread of the *Eka-sarana* faith in lands outside Assam.

**Sankaradeva**, as many competent authorities in Assam and Assamese life have said, brought Assam a new life, letters and a state. He gave to Assam a new discipline of faith in a single Divinity, and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and its unmeaning practices, and gave to the people something simple and straightforward divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced, and he deserves to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulasidasa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of Medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.

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# Ēka Śaraṇa Dharma

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# Ekasarana Dharma

**Ekasarana Dharma**<sup>[1]</sup> (Assamese এক শৰণ ধৰ্ম; literally: 'Shelter-in-One religion') is a panentheistic religion founded and propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. Most of the adherents of this religion today live in the Indian state of Assam. As part of the greater *Bhakti* movement in other parts of India, it rejects vedic and other esoteric rites of worship, and instead replaces them by a simplified form that requires just uttering the name (*naam*) of God.

The simple and accessible religion attracted already Hinduized as well as non-Hindu tribal populations into its egalitarian folds. The new converts were accepted via a system of individual initiation and were given a path to social improvement. Institutions like *sattras* (monasteries) and village *Namghars* (prayer houses), had profound influence in the evolution of social makeup of Assam's society. The artistic oeuvres lead to engendering of new forms of literature, music (*Borgeets* or songs celestials), theatre (*Ankia Naat*) and dance (Sattriya dance).

The central religious text of this religion is Bhagavat of Sankardeva, which was transcreated from the Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana by Srimanta Sankardeva and other religious preceptors. This book is supplemented by the two books of hymns: *Kirtan Ghoxa* by Sankardeva and *Naam Ghoxa* by Madhabdev. These books are written in the Assamese language.

The religion is also called *Mahapuruxiya* because it is based on the worship of the Mahapurux or Mahapurush (Sanskrit: *Maha*: Supreme and *purush*: Being), an epithet of Lord Vishnu in the Bhagavata and its adherents are often called *Mahapuruxia*, *Sankari*, *Saraniya* etc. In course of time, the epithet 'Mahapurux' came to be (secondarily) applied also to Sankardeva and Madhabdev, the principal preceptors. Non-adherence to the Hindu varnasrama system and egalitarianism marked its character.

A strictly monotheistic religion, the only form of worship prescribed by this religion is uttering the name of God ("Sravana-Kirtana"), who is worshiped in the form of Krishna or Hari. Thus it is also called *ek sarana Hari naam dharma*. Though a part of the wider Bhakti movement, it does not worship Radha with Krishna which is common in other bhakti movements. It is characterised by the *dasya* form of worship. Historically, it has been against idol worship, and especially against animal sacrifices common in *sakta* forms of Hinduism. Noted for its egalitarianism, it posed a serious challenge to Brahminical Hinduism, and converted into its fold people of all castes, ethnicity and religion (including Islam).

## Worshipful God and salvation


Subschools of Vedanta



Three Vaishnava schools accept the Bhagavata as authoritative (Madhava, Chaitanya and Vallabha) whereas Ramanuja does not mention it. Sankardev's school accepts the *nirvisesa* God<sup>[2]</sup> and avers on *vivartavada*<sup>[3]</sup> which



maintains that the world is a phenomenal aspect of Brahma, thus taking it very close to Sankaracharya's position.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite this unique philosophical position among the Vaishnavites, the preceptors of Ekasarana or their later followers provided no commentary of the *prasthan-traya* or gloss and did not establish an independent system of philosophy.

Part of a series on	
<b>Vaishnavism</b>	
	
<b>Religion</b>	
Hinduism	
<b>Supreme Deity</b>	
•	Vishnu
•	Krishna
•	Rama
<b>Important deities</b>	
Dashavatara	
•	Matsya
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•	Vamana
•	Parasurama
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Other Avatars	
•	Mohini
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<b>Texts</b>	

•	Vedas
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Puranas	
•	Vishnu
•	Bhagavata
•	Naradeya
•	Garuda
•	Padma
•	Agni
<b>Sampradayas</b>	
•	Sri (Vishishtadvaita)
•	Brahma (Dvaita, Acintyabhedabheda)
•	Rudra (Shuddhadvaita)
•	Nimbarka (Dvaitadvaita)
<b>Philosopher-Acharyas</b>	
•	Nammalvar
•	Yamunacharya
•	Ramanuja
•	Madhva
•	Chaitanya
•	Vallabha
•	Srimanta Sankardev
•	Srimanta Madhavdev
•	Nimbarka
•	Pillai Lokacharya
•	Prabhupada
•	Vedanta Desika
•	Manavala Mamunigal
<b>Related traditions</b>	
•	Pushtimarg
•	Bhagavatism
•	ISKCON
•	Swaminarayan
•	Ekasarana
•	Pranami
•	Ramanandi
•	Vaikhanasas
 <b>Hinduism portal</b>	

The preceptors as well as later leaders of the Ekasarana religion focused mainly on the religious practice of *bhakti* and kept away from systematically expounding philosophical positions.<sup>[5]</sup> Nevertheless references found scattered in the voluminous works of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva indicate that their theosophical positions are rooted in the Bhagavata Purana<sup>[6]</sup> with a strong Advaita influence via its commentary *Bhavartha-dipika* by Sridhar Swami.<sup>[7]</sup> Nevertheless, Sankardeva's interpretation of these texts were seen at once to be "original and new".<sup>[8]</sup> Scholars hold that these texts are not followed *in-toto* and deviations are often seen in the writings especially when the original philosophical contents came into conflict with the primary focus of *bhakti* as enunciated in the Ekasarana-dharma.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Nature of God

Though it acknowledges the impersonal (nirguna) god, it identifies the personal (saguna) one as worshipful<sup>[10]</sup> which it calls Narayana.<sup>[11]</sup> The sole aspect that distinguishes the personal from the impersonal one is the act of creation,<sup>[12]</sup> by which Narayana created everything.

As is implied in the principle of Ekasarana, Sankardev's creed is based on the worship of Krishna – the One God, the supreme entity<sup>[13]</sup> who is suddha (pure), satya (true). All other deities are subservient to Him. Brahman, Vishnu and Krishna are fundamentally one.<sup>[14]</sup> Krishna is alone the supreme worshipful in the system. Sankaradeva's Krishna is Nārāyana, the Supreme Reality or Parama Brahma and not merely an avatara of Visnu. Krishna is God Himself. It considers Narayana (Krishna) as both the cause as well as the effect of this creation,<sup>[15]</sup> and asserts Narayana alone is the sole reality.<sup>[16]</sup> Unlike in Gaudiya Vaishnavism it claims no distinction between Brahman, Paramatman and Bhagavat, which are considered in *Ekasarana* as just different appellations applied to the same supreme reality.<sup>[17]</sup> From the philosophical angle, He is the Supreme Spirit (Param-Brahma). As the controller of the senses, the Yogis call him Paramatma. When connected with this world, He assumes the name of Bhagavanta. Moreover, some of the characteristics usually reserved for the impersonal God in other philosophies are attributed to Narayana with reinterpretations.<sup>[18]</sup>

Even though Narayana is sometimes used synonymously with Vishnu, the gods Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva are considered of lower divinity.<sup>[19]</sup>

Narayana as the personal and worshipful god is considered to be a loving and lovable god, who possesses auspicious attributes that attract devotees. He is non-dual, omnipotent and omniscient; creator, sustainer, and destroyer of all. He also possesses moral qualities like *karunamaya* (compassionate), *dinabandhu* (friend of the lowly), *bhakta-vatsala* (beloved of devotees) and *patit-pavana* (redeemer of sinners) that make him attractive to devotees. Though it does not deny the existence of other gods, it asserts that Narayana alone is worshipful and the others are strictly excluded.

## Jiva and salvation

The embodied self, called *jiva* or *jivatma* is identical to Narayana.<sup>[20]</sup> is shrouded by *maya* and thus suffers from misery,<sup>[21]</sup> When the ego (*ahamkara*) is destroyed, the *jiva* can perceive himself as Brahma.<sup>[22]</sup> The *jiva* attains *mukti* (liberation) when the *jiva* is restored to its natural state (*maya* is removed). Though other Vaishnavites (Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Vallabha, Caitanya) recognise only *videhamukti* (*mukti* after death), the Ekasarana preceptors have recognised, in addition, *jivanmukti* (*mukti* during lifetime). Among the five different kinds of *videhamukti*,<sup>[23]</sup> the Ekasarana rejects the *Sayujya* form of *mukti*, where the complete absorption in God deprives *jiva* of the sweetness and bliss associated with *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is thus not a means to *mukti* but an end to itself, and this is strongly emphasised in Ekasarana writings—Madhavdeva begins his Namaghosha with a obeisance to devotees who do not prefer *mukti*. This identity between the *jivatma* and Narayana is beautifully expressed by Sankaradeva through the words of the Vedas in the 'Veda Stuti' (The Prayer of the Vedas) section of his Kirttana Ghosā, *jiva amse Tumi pravesilā gāve gāve:-*

We, all creatures, constitute a part of Thine. Thy maya, Oh Lord, keeps us in bondage; give us instruction so that we may adore Thy Feet and remove the fetters of maya through Sravana and Kirttana. [1656]

Maya or nescience in Sankaradeva is seen as a barrier to the Lord's bhakti (Devotion). And therefore, to break the fetters of maya, is prescribed the path of adoration (bhajana) of the Lord solely through the listening to (Sravana) and recitation (Kirttana) of His Glories, taking sole-refuge (Eka-Sarana) in Him, in the company of His (single-minded) devotees (bhaktas):-

From these words of Bhagavanta (God), by taking Eka-Sarana in Him, one gains the Lord's favour and is [thus] able to effortlessly understand māyā (nescience) and [also] liberate oneself from it. [Sankaradeva, *Bhakti-Ratnākara*, Māyātaranopāya' ('Way to Release From Māyā'), the 36th Māhātmya]

### Krishna is identical to Narayana

Narayana often manifests through *avatars*, and Krishna is considered as the most perfect one who is not a partial manifestation but Narayana himself.<sup>[24]</sup> It is in the form of Krishna that Narayana is usually worshiped. The description of Krishna is based on the one in Bhagavat Puran, as one who resides in Vaikuntha along with his devotees. Thus the worshipful form is different from other forms of Krishna-based religions (Radha-Krishna of Caitanya, Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacharya, Rukmini-Krishna of Namadeva and Sita-Rama of Ramananda). The form of devotion is infused with the *dasya bhava* as opposed to the *madhura bhava* prevalent in these other religions but singularly absent here.

### Four Reals

The *cari vastu* or the *Four Reals* defined this religious system. They are:

- *Guru* — reverence of a Guru, or Spiritual Preceptor.
- *Deva* — worship of a single God.
- *Naam* — the chanting and singing the name and the qualities of God.
- *Bhakat* — the association or the congregation of devotees (*bhaktas*).

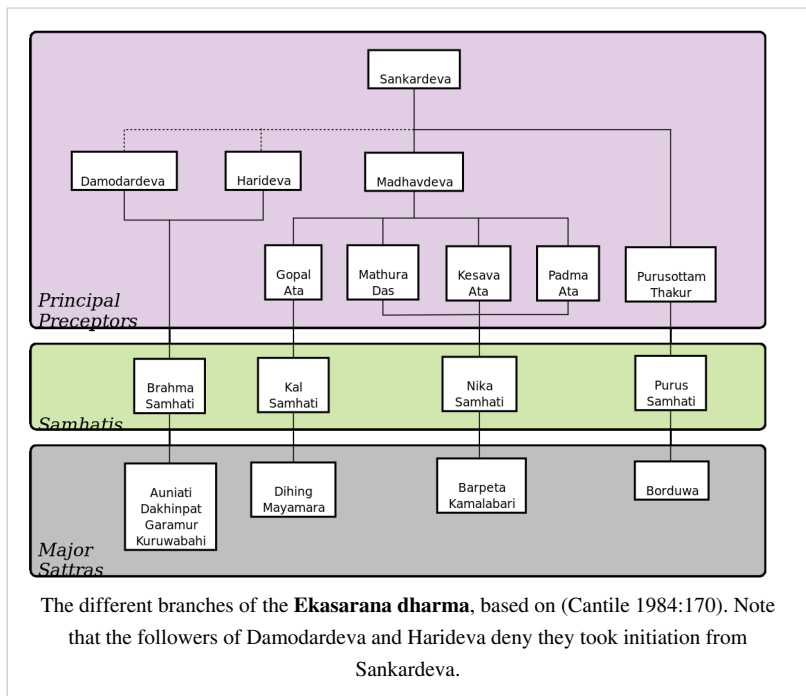
### Four Books: sacred texts

The single most important religious text is the Bhagavata, especially the Book X (*Daxama*). This work was transcreated from the original Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana to Assamese in the 15th and 16th centuries by ten different individuals, but chiefly by Srimanta Sankardev who rendered as many as ten Cantos (complete and partial) of this holy text.

Three other works find a special place in this religion: *Kirtan Ghoxa*, composed by Sankardev; and *Naam Ghoxa* and *Ratnavali*, composed by Madhavdev.

### Denominations

The religion fissured into four *sanghati* (*samhatis* or sub-sects) soon after the death of Srimanta Sankardeva. Sankardeva handed down the leadership to Madhabdev, but the followers of Damodardeva and Harideva did not accept Madhabdeva as their leader and formed their own group (*Brahma sanghati*). Madhabdeva at the time of his death did not name a successor. After his death three leaders formed their own denominations: Bhabanipuria Gopal Ata (*Kaal sanghati*), Purushuttom Thakur Ata, a grandson of Sankardeva (*Purusa sanghati*) and Mathuradas Burhagopal Ata (*Nika Sanghati*). They differ mostly in the emphasis of the *cari vastus* (four fundamental principles)



### Brahma sanghati

The Brahma sanghati developed as a result of Damodardeva and Harideva moving away from Sankardeva's successor Madhabdeva's leadership. Over time this sanghati brought back some elements of Brahminical orthodoxy. The vedic rituals which are generally prohibited in the other sanghatas are allowed in this *sanghati*. Brahmins too found this *sanghati* attractive and most of the Satras of this *sanghati* have traditionally had Brahmin *sattradhikars*. Among the *cari vastus*, *Deva* is emphasised, worship of the images of the *deva* (Vishnu and the chief incarnations, Krishna and Rama) are allowed. Among the gurus Damodardeva is paramount. Later on they came to call themselves *Damodariya* after Damodardev.

### Purusha sanghati

The Purusha sanghati was initiated by the grandsons of Sankardeva—Purushottam Thakur and Chaturbhuj Thakur—after the death of Madhavdeva. The emphasis is on *Naam*. Sankardeva has a special position among the hierarchy of *Gurus*. Some brahmical rites as well as the worship of images is tolerated to some extent.

### Nika sanghati

This *sanghati* was initiated by Padma, Mathuradas and Kesava Ata. The emphasis is on *sat-sanga*. This sanghati is called *Nika* (clean) because it developed strict codes for purity and cleanliness in religious matters as well as in general living, as laid down by Madhabdeva. Idol worship is strictly prohibited and it gives special importance to Madhavdeva.

### Kala sanghati

The Kala *sanghati*, initiated by Gopal Ata and named after the place of his headquarters Kaljar, placed its emphasis on *Guru*. The leader of this *sanghati* came to be considered as the physical embodiment of *Deva*, and the disciples of this sect are not allowed to pay obeisance to anyone else. This sect was successful in initiating many tribal and socially backward groups into the Mahapuruxia fold, and it had the largest following among the different *sanghatas*. The followers of this sect were responsible for the Moamoria rebellion against the Ahom royalty.

## Notes

- [1] Sarma, Cantlie and Barman call it *Ekasarana*. Maheshwar Neog uses both *Ekasarana* as well as *Ekasarana naam-dharma*, qualifying the word *dharma* in the second example. Others call it *Ekasarana Hari-naam-Dharma*, further qualifying the word *dharma*.
- [2] "To him (Sankardev) Brahman is indeterminate (*nirvisesa*)..."
- [3] "Sankardev cannot lend himself to *parinamavada* because of his monistic position and therefore, leans on the side of *vivartavada*
- [4] "...on the philosophical or theoretical side there is scarcely any difference between the two Sankaras.
- [5] Though several schools of *Vaishnavism* had their own philosophical treatises (Ramanuja, Madhava, Nimbarka, Vallabhacharya), Sankardeva and Chaitanya did not. Though Jiva Goswami compiled systematic works for Chaitanya, nothing similar was attempted by Sankardeva's followers
- [6] "Sankardeva was enabled to preach the new faith he had established for himself and for earnest seekers in his province, basing it on the philosophical doctrines of the Gita and the Bhagavata Purana as its scriptures"
- [7] "...the influence of the Bhagavata Purana in forming the theological backbone of Assam Vaishnavism in quite clear and the monistic commentary of Sridhara Swami is highly popular amongst all sections of Vaishnavas"
- [8] "If there could be any question of mutation or affiliation still, it could have been with the Gita and the Bhagawat direct which Sankardev read and interpreted in his own way, at once original and new". Haladhar Bhuyan, the founder of the Sankar Sangha, a modern sect of Ekasarana concurs: "Sri Neog now definitely shows that Sankardev's philosophy is his own and that his religion is as original as that of any great preacher of the world"
- [9] For example, "the Chapters of the Bhagavata Purana, where the Pancharatra theology is discussed, have been omitted by Assamese translators because the *Vyuha* doctrine finds no place in the theology of Assamese Vaishnavism." ; "the highly philosophical benedictory verse (*mangalacarana*) of Book I of the Bhagavata-Purana, which has been elaborately commented upon by Sridhara from the monistic stand-point, has been totally omitted by Sankardeva in his rendering." Whereas, "Kapila of *Samkhya* is an incarnation of God" in the original, *Samkhya* and *Yoga* are made subservient to *bhakti*. Furthermore, "Where Sridhara's commentary appears to them in direct conflict with their Ekasarana-dharma, they have not hesitated to deviate from Sridhara's views."
- [10] "Assamese Vaishnava scriptures without denying the *nirguna*, i.e. indeterminate aspect of God, have laid more stress on the *saguna* aspect."

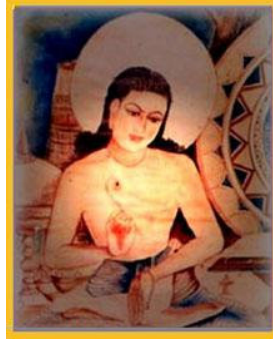
- [11] "The first two lines of *Kirtana* has struck this note: 'At the very outset, I bow to the eternal Brahman who in the form of Narayana is the root of all incarnations'"
- [12] *Nimi-nava-siddha-sambad*, verses 187–188
- [13] Therefore, it is the incarnate Krishna Who is the Param-Brahma, denoting Om, and it is He Who is also the world's father and mother. The Deity of Worship (ārādhyā devatā) of all gods and goddesses or, in other words, of life itself, is Lord Krishna only.
- [14] Brahman, Vishnu and Krishna are fundamentally one
- [15] *Kirtana* VIII
- [16] *Bhakti-ratnakar*, verse 111
- [17] *ekerese tini nama laksana bhedata* in *Nimi-navasiddha-sambada* verses 178–181 (Sankardeva)
- [18] For example, *nirakara* is used to describe Narayana as someone without an ordinary or special form (*prakrita akara varjita*)
- [19] *Nimi-navasiddha-samvada*, verse 178 (Sankardeva); *Anadi-patan* verses 163–167 (Sankardeva)
- [20] "Though associated with body yet I am not identical with it: I am verily Paramatma. I am Brahma and Brahma is I", Sankardeva in *Bhagavata* Book XII verses 18512-18518
- [21] Sankardeva, *Bhakti-ratnakara*, verse 773
- [22] Sankardeva, *Bhagavata*
- [23] (1) *Salokyo* (being in the same plane as God); (2) *Samipyā* (nearness to God); (3) *Sarupyā* (likeness to God); (4) *Sarsti* (equaling God in glory) and (5) *Sayujya* (absorption in God)
- [24] based on the *Bhagavata Puran*, 1/3/28

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# Sankardev

## Srimanta Sankardev



Imaginary portrait of Srimanta Sankardev by Bishnu Prasad Rabha<sup>[1]</sup>

<b>Born</b>	1449 Bardowa, Nagaon, Assam, India
<b>Died</b>	1568 Bheladonga, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India
<b>Titles/honours</b>	Venerated as <i>Mahapurusha</i>
<b>Founder of</b>	Ekasarana Dharma
<b>Philosophy</b>	Ekasarana
<b>Quotation</b>	Do, therefore, regard all and everything as though they were God Himself. Seek not to know the caste of a Brahmana nor of a Chandala.

**Srimanta Sankardev**<sup>[2]</sup> ([ˈʃɪmʌntə ˈʃænkə(r),deɪv]; 1449–1568) (Assamese: মহাপুৰুষ শ্ৰীমন্ত শঙ্কৰদেৱে *Môhapurux Srimôntô Xônkôrdeu*), was a 15th–16th century Assamese polymath: a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam, India. He is widely credited with building on past cultural relics and devising new forms of music (Borgeet), theatrical performance (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), dance (Sattriya), literary language (Brajavali). Besides, he has left an extensive literary oeuvre of trans-created scriptures (Bhagavat of Sankardev), poetry and theological works written in Sanskrit, Assamese and Brajavali. The Bhagavatic religious movement he started, Ekasarana Dharma and also called Neo-Vaishnavite movement, influenced two medieval kingdoms---Koch and the Ahom kingdoms---and the assembly of devotees he initiated evolved into Sattras over time, which continue to be important socio-religious institutions in Assam and to a lesser extend in North Bengal. Sankardev inspired the Bhakti movement in Assam just as Guru Nanak, Ramananda, Kabir, Basava and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu inspired it elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. His influence spread even to some kingdoms as the Matak Kingdom founded by Bharat Singha, and consolidated by Sarbanda Singha in the latter 18th century endorsed his teachings.<sup>[3]</sup>

His literary and artistic contributions are living traditions in Assam today. The religion he preached is practiced by a large population, and Sattras (monasteries) that he and his followers established continue to flourish and sustain his legacy.

## Biography

After the death of Sankardev, Madhavdev incorporated narrations of his life in prayer services, a practice that was followed by his apostles, and in due course of time a large body of biographical literature arose. These are generally classed in two groups: early (those by Daityari Thakur, Bhusan Dwija, Ramananda Dwija and Vaikuntha Dwija) and late (*Guruvarnana* by Aniruddha Das, the more than one anonymous *Katha-guru-carits*, *Bardowa-carit*, *Sankardev caritra* from Barpeta, the *Saru-svarga-khanda* and *Bar-svarga-khanda* by Sarvabhauma). The authorship of the biography credited to Ramcaran Thakur, Daityari Thakur's father, is doubted and it is generally dated to the 17th-century and classed with the late biographies.

In general, all biographies consider Sankardev as an incarnation of Vishnu, including that by Daityari Thakur, the earliest. The late biographies differ from the early group on the count that they ascribe supernatural feats to Sankardev, and describe miraculous events; and there is a tendency to read some events of the Bhagavata into his life. The biographies are full of contradictions; even though the earlier ones are considered more accurate, not all they claim are true—Daityari Thakur's biography, the earliest one, claims Sankardev met with Chaitanya, which is now not accepted to be true.

## Early life: Alipukhuri and Bordowa

### Sankardev's Family Tree





Hari      Manu      Ramananda      Kamalocana      Haricarana      Kamalapriya      Chilarai

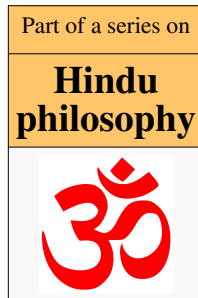
Purushottam      Chaturbhuj

Sankardev, then named Sankaravara, was born into the Shiromani (chief) *Baro-Bhuyans* family at Alipukhuri near Bordowa in present-day Nagaon district in c1449.<sup>[4]</sup> Though some authors have expressed doubt that Sankardev could have lived that long, considering that he was of robust health 1449 is generally accepted. The Baro-Bhuyans were independent landlords in Assam, and Sankardev belonged to the Kayastha Hindu caste. His family-members, including parents Kusumvar Bhuyan and Satyasandhya Devi, were Saktas. Sankardev lost his father to smallpox when he was about 7 years old, and his mother died either soon after his birth, or soon after his father's death; and he was raised by his grandmother Khersuti.

He began attending Mahendra Kandali's *tol* or *chatrasaal* (school) at the age of 12 and soon wrote his first verses *karatala-kamala*. The complete poem was written before he was taught the vowels except, of course, the first one, and is often cited as an example of the early flowering of his poetic genius. He stayed at the *tol* during his teens, and studied grammar and Indian scriptures. He practiced *yoga* (which he gave up later) and was physically very able, and according to legend, he could swim across the Brahmaputra while it was in spate. It is generally believed that he wrote his first work, *Harishchandra upakhyan*, while at the *tol*. Mahendra Kandali changed his name to 'Sankardev' while he was at school.

### **Bhuyan shiromaniship**

Sankardev soon mastered the major scriptures of Sanatana Dharma and thereafter left the *tol* in his late teens (c1465) in order to attend to his responsibilities as the Shiromani Bhuyan. He came to be known as the *Dekagiri* among his subjects and admirers. As Alipukhuri had become crowded, he moved his household from Alipukhuri to Bordowa. He married his first wife Suryavati when he was in his early 20s and a daughter, Manu, was born in about three years, but his wife died about nine months later.



### **First pilgrimage**

It is possible that the death of his wife increased his already existing spiritual inclination and he left for a twelve-year long pilgrimage, sometime after his daughter was married to Hari, a Bhuyan scion. He handed over the maintenance of his household to his son-in-law Hari; the Bhuyan Shiromaniship to his grand uncles Jayanta and Madhav; and began his journey in 1481. He was accompanied by seventeen others including his friend and associate Ramaram and his teacher Mahendra Kandali. At this point of time, he was 32. The pilgrimage took him to Puri, Mathura, Dwaraka, Vrindavan, Gaya, Rameswaram, Ayodhya, Sitakunda and almost all the other major seats of the Vaishnavite religion in India. He seem to have spent many years at Jagannath-kshetra at Puri, where he read and explained the Brahma Purana to the priests and lay people. At Badrikashram in 1488, he composed his first *borgeet*—*mana meri ram charanahi lagu*—in Brajavali. According to Katha Gurucharit, the first Borgeet was

"Rama meri hridaya pankaje baise" and he composed it in 1481 at the very outset of the pilgrimage at a place called Rowmari. He returned home to Alipukhuri after 12 years (his family had moved back from Bordowa in his absence). During his pilgrimage, he became the part of a pan-Indian Bhakti movement and helped it blossom.

### ***Shiromaniship refusal***

On his return from his pilgrimage (c1493), Sankardev refused to take back the Shiromaniship, though on the insistence of his elders, he took responsibility of a hundred families (*gomastha*) but he soon handed over the responsibility to his son-in-law Hari. On his grandmother's insistence, he married Kalindi at the age of 54. Finally, he moved back to Bordowa and constructed a temple (*devagriha*) in c1498,<sup>[5]</sup> possibly a thatched house, built on the original site of his father's house where he could meet with people, discuss religious matters and hold prayers, and preach. He wrote *Bhakti pradipa* and *Rukmini harana*. Soon after, he received a copy of the Bhagavata Purana from Jagadisa Mishra of Tirhut, with Sridhara Swami's monistic commentary "Bhavartha-dipika". Mishra recited and explained the entire Bhagavata in the presence of Sankardev and this event is considered momentous in the development of Ekasarana. Dityari, an early biographer of Sankardev writes: Sankardev listened with rapt attention to the exposition by Jagadish Mishra and realised that the *Bhagavata* was a scripture without parallel, a scripture that determined Krishna as the only God, *naam* as the real dharma, and *aikantika-sarana* and *sat-sanga* as the indispensable elements of the faith." He also began composing the *Kirtana ghosha*.

### ***Cihna-yatra***

After his exposure to the detailed Bhagavata Purana and Sridhara Swami's commentary *Bhavartha-dipika*, Sankardev produced a dance-drama called *Cihna yatra*, for which he painted the *Sapta vaikuntha* (seven heavens), guided the making of musical instruments and played the instruments himself.<sup>[6][7]</sup> According to other biographers, Sankardev produced *Maha-nata* in the presence of Jagdish Mishra in the temple he had constructed at Alipukhuri.

According to Neog, this was the point when Sankardev decided to preach a new religion. Some of the first to be initiated into this religion was the wife of Jayanta-dalai, a leper named Hariram (later Tulasiram), Ramaram his associate and Mahendra Kandali, his *tol* teacher. The 13 years at Alipukhuri was the period during which he reflected deeply on Vaishnavism and on the form that would best suit the spiritual and ethical needs of the people. Ananta Kandali, a profound scholar of Sanskrit, became his disciple during this time; he translated the later part of Canto X of the Bhagavata Purana after consulting Sankardev.

From Alipukhuri Sankardev moved back to Bordowa in 1509 and built a *thaan*. Some authors claim that this *than* had all the major features of a sattrā (central *kirtanghar*, *cari-hati* etc.), whereas many others assert that these features did not exist during Sankardev's time.<sup>[8][9]</sup> This *than* was abandoned and more than a hundred years later in the middle of the 17th-century, Sankardev's granddaughter-in-law, Kanaklata, established it again.

### **Literary works in the Baro-Bhuyan territories**

#### 1. Non-*Bhagavata* group

- *Harishcandra-Upakhyana*
- *Bhakti-pradip*
- *Kirtan-ghosa (Uresa-varnana)*

#### 2. Non-*Bhagavata* mixed with *Bhagavata* elements, not influenced by Sridhara Swami

- *Rukmini-harana-kavya*

#### 3. Lyrics

- *Borgeet*

#### 4. *Bhagavata* tales, not from Book X

- *Ajamilopakhyan* (Book VI)
- *Amrta-manthan* (Book VIII)

- *Kirtan-ghosa (Ajamilopakhyan, Prahlada-caritra, Harmohana, Bali-chalana, Gajendropakhyana, Dhyana-varnana)*

## 5. *Gunamala*

- Sections ii–vi

## Ahom kingdom

### Gangmau

Viswa Singha, began his activities to remove the Bhuyans from power in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley in 1509. Furthermore, the Bhuyans in the Bordowa area picked up a quarrel with their Kachari neighbors, and when attacked Sankardev advised the Bhuyans to move, which brought to an end the independence of this group of Bhuyans. Sankardev and his associates first crossed the Brahmaputra river in 1516-17 and settled first at Singari and finally at Routa; and when Viswa Singha advanced towards Routa, Sankardev moved to Gangmau in the Ahom kingdom. At Gangmau they stayed for five years where Sankardev's eldest son Ramananda was born. At Gangmau, he wrote the drama *Patniprasad*. In fact he lived alone at a place named Gajalasuti out of dissatisfaction with some relative. He penned the play there.

### Dhuwahat

While at Gangmau, the Koch king Viswa Singha attacked the Ahoms. The Bhuyans fought for the Ahoms and the Koch king was defeated. Due to the unsettled situation at Gangmau Sankardev next moved to Dhuwahat, near Ahatguri in present-day Majuli, washed away by the Brahmaputra in 1913. The Bhuyans were settled here by the Ahoms with land and estate,<sup>[10]</sup> Hari, Sankardev's son-in-law became a Saikia, and his cousin Jagatananda, grandson of Jayanta received a title 'Ramarai'. At Dhuwahat, he met his spiritual successor Madhavdev. Madhavdev, a sakta, got into a religious altercation with his brother-in-law Ramadas who had recently converted to Vaishnavism. Ramadas took him to Sankardev, who, after a long debate, convinced him of the power and the efficacy of *Ekasarana*. The acquisition of Madhavdev, with his talent in poetry, singing and dedication to his new-found religion and guru, was a significant event in the *Ekasarana* history. At Dhuwahat he managed to attract a wider attention and popularity and he initiated many others into his religion.

The popularity of *Ekasarana* and the conversion of people alarmed the priestly Brahmins, who reacted with anger and hostility. Sankardev tried to diffuse their hostility—by meeting with them at the house of his relative Budha-Khan and asking his Brahmin antagonists to install a wooden idol of Jagannath, called Madan-Mohan, at his religious seat. (Sankardev left this idol hanging on a tree when he took flight from Dhuwahat, and it was rescued years later by Vamshigopaldev and installed at Deberapar-sattra).<sup>[11]</sup> The Brahmins finally complained to the Ahom king, Suhungmung (1497–1539), who summoned Sankardev to his court for a debate with them. Sankardev was able to convince the king that he was not a religious rebel and a threat to the social order, and the charges against him were dropped. The hostility, nevertheless, continued.

### *Flight from Dhuwahat*

Though the positions of the Bhuyans in the Ahom kingdom began comfortably—with Sankardev's son-in-law, Hari, becoming a Paik officer and Ramrai, his cousin, becoming a royal official—the relationship gradually deteriorated. After the death of Viswasingha, who was inimical to the Bhuyans, and the rise of Naranarayan (1540), the Koch-Bhuyan relationship improved somewhat.<sup>[12]</sup> Sometime in the 1540s during the reign of Suklenmung (1539-1552) a royal officer visited the region for an elephant capturing expedition. Hari did not make himself available and furthermore, an elephant escaped through a barrier managed by the Bhuyans. The officer took grave offence in this dereliction of duty and arrested Hari as well as Madhavdev. At Garhgaon, Hari was executed and Madhavdev interned for about a year. According to Daityari, taking advantage of the Koch advance against the Ahoms (1546-1547), Sankardev and his followers escaped from the Ahom kingdom as they fell behind the vanguard

of the Koch army setting up their garrison in Narayanpur further to the east.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Literary works in the Ahom kingdom

1. Arguments against those antagonistic to *bhakti*

- *Kirtan-ghosa (Pasanda-mardana, Namaparadha)*
- *(Vipra)-patni-prasad (Ankia Naat)*

2. Tales from Krishna's early life

- *Kirtan-ghosa (sisu-lila, rasa-krida, kamsavadha, gopi-uddhava-samvada, kujir vancha-purana, akrurar vancha-purana)*

3. *Borgeets*

### Koch kingdom

#### Sunpora

Sankardev and his followers reached Kapalabari in Koch kingdom in later part of 1540 and put up there. But the water was very alkaline there. Several members including Madhavdev's mother Manorama died there. So after staying for some time at Kapalabari, Sankardev and his group moved to Sunpora in 1541. At Sunpora Sankardev initiated Bhavananda, a rich trader who had extensive business interest in the Garo and Bhutan hills besides Kamarupa. The trader, Narayana Das, settled at Janiya near Barpeta and took to agriculture. A man of the world otherwise, he soon flourished and became a provider to Sankardev and his devotees. He came to be known popularly as Thakur Ata.

#### Patbausi

After a great deal of moving, Sankardev settled at Patbausi near Barpeta in the Koch Kingdom and constructed a *Kirtanghar* (house of prayer). Some of the people he initiated here are Chakrapani Dwija and Sarvabhaum Bhattacharya, Brahmins; Govinda, a Garo; Jayaram, a Bhutia; Madhai, a Jaintia; Jatiram, an ascetic; and Murari, a Koch. Damodardev, a Brahmin, was initiated by Sankardev. Damodardev was entrusted by Sankardev to initiate Brahmin disciples. A Sattrā was also constructed for him at Patbausi itself. Later Damodardev became the founder of the Brahma Sanghati sect of Sankardev's religion.

Among Sankardev's literary works, he completed his rendering of the Bhagavata Purana and wrote other independent works. He continued composing the Kirtan Ghosha, further translated the first canto of the Ramayana (*Adi Kanda*) and instructed Madhavdev to translate the last canto (*Uttara Kanda*), portions that were left undone by the 14th century poet Madhav Kandali. He wrote four plays: *Rukmini harana*, *Parijata harana*, *Keligopala* and *Kalidamana*. Another play written at Patbausi, *Kansa Vadha*, is lost. At Patbausi, he had lent his Bargeets numbering around 240 to Kamala Gayan. But unfortunately, Gayan's house was gutted and most of the *borgeets* were lost. Since that incident Sankardev stopped composing *Bargeets*. Of the 240, 34 remain today.

### Second Pilgrimage

Sankardev once again left for a pilgrimage in 1550 with a large party of 117 disciples that included Madhavdev, Ramrai, Ramaram, Thakur Ata and others. Thakur Ata had to return after just one day's journey. Madhavdev had to take entire responsibility of logistics. He on the request of Sankardev's wife Kalindi urged him to return from Puri and not proceed to Vrindavana. Sankardev and the group returned to Patbausi within six months in 1551.

### Koch capital and Bheladanga

On hearing complaints repeatedly that Sankardev was corrupting the minds of the people by spreading a new religion Naranarayana, the Koch king, ordered Sankardev's arrest. On hearing of the anger of the king and the king's order Chilarai(Sukladvaj), the general of the Koch army and brother of Naranarayana, who was aware of Sankardev and his religion having married Kamalapriya (Bhubaneswari) the daughter of Sankardev's cousin Ramarai, immediately dispatched eight of his own soldiers ordering them to travel non-stop and reach Patbausi before the King's men. They were instructed to arrest Sankardev 'on orders of the Yuvraj' on a drummed up pretext, before the King's men reached there. The King's men, when they reached, could not arrest Sankardev, as he was already under arrest of the Yuvraj Chilarai. Sankardev was thus "kidnapped" and brought safely to the Prince's Garden Palace where he was received with great honour. Chilarai then pleaded the King to give an audience to Sankardev before condemning him. The King agreed to do so.

In the audience with Naranarayana, as he moved up the steps to the throne, Sankardev sang his Sanskrit *totaka* hymn, composed extempore, to Lord Krishna, now known as Totaya—*madhu daanava daarana deva varam* and as he sat down, he sang a *borgeet*, *narayana kahe bhakati karu tera*. Naranarayana was mesmerized by the serene and elegant personality. Sankara, moreover, effectively refuted in the King's court, all the arguments put forward by the pundits against his preaching. The king was impressed and not only declared him free from all allegations but also gave Sankara the honour of a seat next to him, close to the throne. The King was convinced of his greatness and honoured him and permitted him to freely spread his religion. Sankardev began attending Naranarayana's Royal court at the king's request.

It was The Great Warrior Chilarai, who not only saved Sankaradeva from certain death, but it was only due to his Royal Patronage that Sankaradeva was able to establish the Ek –Saran- Naam- Dharma in Assam and bring about his cultural renaissance. Chilarai built a garden house for Sankardev and his followers to stay at Patbausi. All of Sankardev's major literary and dramatic works were completed here with his patronage and protection. Sankaradeva, too, in his play 'Ram Vijaya', has appreciated Prince Sukladhvaja.

Sankardev shuttled between Kochbehar and Patbausi. During his visits to the Koch Behar royal court, Sankaradeva often regaled Prince Chilarai with descriptions of the fun-filled childhood days of the young Krishna in Vrindavan. The prince was enthralled, and wished to experience more deeply the Lord's pastimes, so Sankaradeva agreed to have the narrative inscribed on cloth in pictorial form.

He engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to weave a forty-yard long tapestry panel depicting Krishna's early life in Vrindavan. Sankaradeva provided the designs to be woven, chose the various colours of thread to be used, and personally supervised the weaving. It took about a year to complete and, deriving its name from its theme, came to be known as the Vrindavani Vastra . It was presented to Chilarai and Nara Narayan, who were both overwhelmed with the result.

Thus, On the request and patronage of Nara Narayan and Chilarai, Sankardev supervised the creations of the 60mx30m woven *Vrindavani vastra*, that depicted the playful activities of Krishna in Vrindavana. This outstanding work of Sankardev is preserved now in the Victoria and Albert museum in London.

Chandsai a Muslim tailor serving king Naranarayana was very unhappy with Sankardev and his followers. But he soon became disciple of Sankardev at Kochbehar when he once saw a four armed vision of the saint. When Sankardev returned to Patbausi some time later, Chandsai too came with the saint.

**The story of the Elephant in the Lime-pot:** The King held many debates in his court between the Pandits and Sankaradeva. King Naranarayan once asked the court poets to give him, in one day, a condensed version of the entire ten cantos of the Bhagawat Purana. When all Pundits said it was not possible to do so in such a short time, Sankara took up the challenge and accomplished the feat in one night.

After he had condensed the substance of the ten chapters of the Bhagawat Purana into a small booklet, he put it into a small wooden box. Then over this, he painted with hengul-haital (yellow and red) an elephant squeezed inside a circle. He called it Bhurukaat Haathi- meaning an elephant squeezed into a lime-pot! This scripture was Gunamala. The pleased King Naranarayana honoured Sankaradeva.

Sankardeva, in gratitude has penned three panegyrics (called Bhatima in Assamese) in praise of the King Nara Narayan – a very rare thing to do for a saint devoted solely to God.

The advent of Srimanta Sankaradeva into the Koch Kingdom marked the Golden Era of Assamese Renaissance. Maharaja Nara Narayan and the Great General Chilarai came to be the chief patrons of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva during their stay in the Kingdom of Koch-Behar (Cooch Behar) till the end. Sankardev and Madhavdev freely propagated *Ekasarana Dharma* with their Royal patronage. Sankardev stayed in this kingdom for more than 20 years till his *Maha Prayan* in 1568.

## End

He made arrangements with Madhavdev and Thakur Ata and gave them various instructions at Patbausi and left the place for the last time. He set up his home at Bheladonga in Kochbehar. During his stay at Kochbehar, Maharaja Naranarayana expressed his wish to be initiated. Sankardev was reluctant to convert a king and declined to do so. (According to one of the biographers Ramcharan Thakur) A painful boil; a *visha phohara* – had appeared in some part of his body and this led to the passing away of the Saint. Thus, in 1568, after leading a most eventful life dedicated to enlightening humanity; the *Mahapurusha* breathed his last – after four months of his last stay at Bheladonga– at the remarkable age of 120 years.

## Literary works in the Koch kingdom

### 1. *Bhagavata* tales, not from Book X

- *Bali-chalana* (Book VIII)
- *Anadi-patana* (Book III, *Vamana-purana*)

### 2. *Bhagavata* tales from Books X, XI, XIII

- *Kirtan-ghosa* (*Jarasandha yudha*, *Kalayavana badha*, *Mucukunda-stuti*, *Syamanta-haran*, *Naradar-krishna-darsan*, *Vipra-putra-anayana*, *Daivakir-putra-anayana*, *Veda-stuti*, *Lilamala*, *Rukminir-prem-kalah*, *Bhrigu-pariksha*, *srikrishnar-vaikuntha-prayana*, *Chaturvimsati-avatar-varnana*, *Tatparya*)

### 3. *Gunamala*

- Section i<sup>[14]</sup>

### 4. Renderings of *Bhagavata Purana*

- *Bhagavata X* (*Adi*)
- *Bhagavata XI* (with material from Books I and III)
- *Bhagavata XII*
- *Bhagavata I*
- *Bhagavata II*
- *Bhagavata IX* (lost)
- *Kurukshetra* (Book X, *Uttarardha*)
- *Nimi-nava-siddha-samvada*

### 5. From *Ramayana*

- Ramayana, *Uttara-kanda*
6. Lyrics
    - Borgeets
    - Totaya
    - Bhatima
  7. Doctrinal treatise
    - *Bhakti-ratnakar*
  8. Drama (Ankia Naat)
    - *Kali-daman*
    - *Keli-gopal*
    - *Rukmini-haran*
    - *Parijat-haran*
    - *Ram-vijay*
  9. Visual Art
    - *Vrindavani vastra* – parts of this work are preserved in London.

## ***Ekasarana***

Sankardev used the form of Krishna to preach devotion to a single God (*eka sarana*), who can be worshiped solely by uttering His various names (*naam*). In contrast to other bhakti forms, *eka sarana* follows the *dasya* attitude (a slave to God). Moreover, unlike the 'Gaudiya Vaishnavism' of Bengal, Radha is not worshiped along with Krishna. In uttering the name of God, *Hari, Rama, Narayana* and *Krishna* are most often used.

Sankardev's famous debate with Madhavdev, who was a staunch sakta (devotee of Shakti) earlier, and Madhavdev's subsequent conversion to Vaishnavism, is often cited as the single most epoch-making event in the history of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Madhavdev, an equally multi-talented person, became his most celebrated disciple.

Srimanta Sankardev started a system of initiation (*Sarana*) into his religion. He caused a huge Social revolution by fighting against anti-social elements like casteism prevailing at that time. He initiated people of all castes and religions, including Muslims. After initiation, the devotee is expected to adhere to the religious tenets of **Eka Sarana**.

Though he himself married twice, had children and led the life of a householder, his disciple Madhavdev did not. Some of his followers today follow celibate life (*kevaliya bhakat*) in the Vaishnavite monasteries – the *sattras*.

The people who practice his religion are called variously as *Mahapurushia, Sarania* or *Sankari*.

## **Literary Works**

Sankardev produced a large body of work. Though there were others before him who wrote in the language of the common man – Madhav Kandali who translated the Ramayana into Assamese in the 14th century – his was the first ramayana to be written in a modern Indian language – Harivara Vipra and Hema Saraswati, it was Sankardev who opened the floodgates and inspired others like Madhavdev to carry on where he left off.

His language is lucid, his verses lilting, and he infused *bhakti* into everything he wrote. His magnum opus is his *Kirtana-ghosha*, a work so popular that even today it is found in nearly every household in Assam. It contains narrative verses glorifying Krishna meant for community singing. It is a *bhakti kayva* par excellence, written in a lively and simple language, it has "stories and songs for amusement [for children], it delights the young with true poetic beauty and elderly people find here religious instruction and wisdom".

For most of his works, he used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used Brajavali, an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese.

Other literary works include the rendering of eight books of the *Bhagavata Purana* including the *Adi Dasama* (Book X), *Harishchandra-upakhyana* (his first work), *Bhakti-pradip*, the *Nimi-navasiddha-samvada* (conversation between King Nimi and the nine Siddhas), *Bhakti-ratnakara* (Sanskrit verses, mostly from the Bhagavata, compiled into a book), *Anadi-patana* (having as its theme the creation of the universe and allied cosmological matters), *Gunamala* and many plays like *Rukmini haran*, *Patni prasad*, *Keli gopal*, *Kurukshetra yatra* and *Srirama vijaya*. There was thus a flowering of great Bhakti literature during his long life of 120 years.

### Poetic works (*kavya*)

- *Kirtana-ghosha*
- *Harishchandra-upakhyana*
- *Rukmini-harana*
- *Ajamilopakhyana*
- *Bali-chalana*
- *Kurukshetra-yatra*
- *Gopi-uddhava-samvada*
- *Amrta-manthana*
- *Krishna-prayana-pandava-niryana*
- *Kamajaya*

### Bhakti Theory

- *Bhakti-pradipa*
- *Anadi-patana*
- *Nimi-navasiddha-samvada*
- *Bhakti Ratnakara* (in Sanskrit)
- *Gunamala*

### Transliteration

- *Bhagavata* (Book VI, VIII, I, II, VII, X, XI, XII, IX, X(partial), XI(partial) & XII)
- *Ramayana* (*Uttarakanda*, supplemental to Madhav Kandali's Saptakanda Ramayana)

His translation of the *Bhagavata* is actually a transcreation, because he translates not just the words but the idiom and the physiognomy too. He has adapted the original text to the local land and people and most importantly for the purpose of bhakti. Portions of the original were left out or elaborated where appropriate. For example, he suppressed the portions that revile the lower castes of *sudra* and *kaivartas*, and extols them elsewhere.



## Drama (*Ankia Nat*)

- *Cihna Yatra* (lost)
- *Patni-prasada*
- *Janma-jatra* (lost)
- *Kangsa-badha* (lost)
- *Parijata-harana*
- *Kali-damana*
- *Rukmini-harana*
- *Keli-gopala*
- *Srirama-vijaya*

Sankardev was the fountainhead of the *Ankiya naat*, a form of one-act play. His *Cihna Yatra* is regarded as one of the first open-air theatrical performances in the world. *Cihna yatra* was probably a dance drama and no text of that show is available today. Innovations like the presence of a *Sutradhara* (narrator) on the stage, use of masks etc., were used later in the plays of Bertolt Brecht and other eminent playwrights.

These cultural traditions still form an integral part of the heritage of the Assamese people.

## Songs

- *Borgeet* (composed 240, but only 34 exist now)
- *Bhatima*
  - *Deva bhatima* – panegyrics to God
  - *Naat bhatima* – for use in dramas
  - *Raja bhatima* – panegyrics to king Nara Narayan

The *Borgeets* (literally: great songs) are devotional songs, set to music and sung in various *raga* styles. These styles are slightly different from either the Hindustani or the Carnatic styles. The songs themselves are written in the 'Brajavali' language.

## Dance

Sattriya dance, that Sankardev first conceived and developed and which was later preserved for centuries by the *sattras*, is now among the classical dance forms of India. Although certain devout Sankarite calls this form as Sankari dance

## Visual Art

- *Sapta vaikuntha* – part of the *Cihna yatra* production, does not exist today.
- *Vrindavani vastra* – parts of this work are preserved in London.

The famous *Vrindavani Vastra*—the cloth of Vrindavan—a 120 x 60 cubits tapestry depicted the *lilas* of Lord Krishna at Vrindavan through richly woven and embroidered designs on silk. A specimen, believed to be a part of this work, is at the Association pour l'Etude et la Documentation des Textiles d'Asie collection at Paris (inv. no. 3222). The *vastra*, commissioned by Koch king Naranarayana, was woven by 12 master weavers in Barpeta under the supervision of Sankardev over a period of six month and completed towards the end of 1554. This textile art depicted the life and deeds of lord Krishna, who is worshipped in Eka Sarana Nama Dharma. The cloth was housed in the royal court of Kochbehar after the saint presented it to the king; but it disappeared at some point. It is believed that parts of this cloth made its way to Tibet and from there to its present place.

## Notes

- [1] This portrait, created by Bishnu Rabha in the 20th-century, is generally accepted as the "official" portrait of Sankardev, whose likeness in pictorial form is not available from any extant form
- [2] The name is spelt variously as Sankardev, Sankardeva and Sankaradeva. Further discussion may be seen at relevant talk page.
- [3] P. 372 *Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh* edited by Byomakesh Tripathy, Sristidhar Dutta
- [4] The traditional date of Sankardev's birth, generally considered correct, is in the month of Ashwin-Kartika (October) 1449 Assuming the middle of October as his birthdate in that year, his life span was 118 years, 10 months and a few days.
- [5] After five years, Sankara had a temple built for him a little away from the abode of householder"
- [6] The early biographers are silent on *Cihna-yatra*. *Katha-guru-carita* and *Borduwa-carita*, both late biographies, say *Cihna-yatra* was performed after Sankardev's first pilgrimage; only Ramcaran says Sankardev arranged it when he was 19 years old, which is unlikely according to Maheswar Neog.
- [7] But Bhuban Chandra Bhuyan, Dr. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti etc have opined that Cihna yatra was enacted before the pilgrimage, to be precise in 1468 AD.
- [8] "It is not know from biographical or contemporary literature of the period whether the sattra of Sankardev besides containing the prayer-hall and the shrine did really contain the system of *cari-hati* like that of later-day sattras".
- [9] "It may be recalled (Daityari, *Katha-guru-carit*) that in Sankardev's days, the daily sittings...were held in the open or under shades of trees"
- [10] "Ere long, the inroads of the Bhutanese and the Koches compelled them to shift their residence to Dhuwahat-Belaguri, where the Ahom monarch settled them with land and estate."
- [11] The wooden idol was carved by one Korola Bhadai, and his invitation to the priests were conveyed by his brahmin associate Ramaram
- [12] "Prataprai Gabharu-Khan, who had escaped to Gauda when Viswasingha attacked them, returned to Kamrup and made a sort of alliance with Naranarayan
- [13] The year of Sankardev's escape is generally taken as 1546, first suggested by Bezbaroa . Others suggest 1540 .
- [14] "The *Bardowa-carit* and, depending on it, Lakshminath Bezbaroa (in his *Sankaradeva*) hold that five sections of the work (that is the whole book, without the first section) were composed much earlier, and that it was presented to one Satananda or Devidas at Gangmau"

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## External links

- [atributetosankaradeva.org](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/) (<http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/>) - The Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Art, Culture (and more) of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev
- [sankaradeva.com](http://sankaradeva.com) (<http://sankaradeva.com>) - Website of SOCIETY FOR SRIMANTA SANKARADEVA, a global group for propagating Srimanta Sankaradeva's message
- The Srimanta Foundation Website (<http://www.srimantafoundation.org>) - contains crisp, concise and informative articles on various facets of Sankari culture.
- Songs Of Devotion (<http://web.archive.org/web/20091027150711/http://www.geocities.com/bipuljyoti/music/bargeet.html>) A scholarly article on 'Bargeet' by Birendranath Datta.
- Majuli (<http://members.tripod.com/majuli/culture.htm>)-The epitome of satriya culture
- The Satras of Assam (<http://www.hindubooks.org/temples/assam/satras-I/index.htm>) - By BK Barua and HV Sreenivasa Murthy, pages from hindubooks.org

# Bhagavat of Sankardev

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The **Bhagavat of Sankardev** is the Assamese adaptation of the Bhagavata Purana made by Srimanta Sankardev in 15th-16th century in the regions that form present-day Assam and Cooch Behar. Though the major portions of the work was transcreated by Sankardev, a few other writers from that period contributed to the remaining sections.

This book is revered and forms the central religious text for the followers of Sankardev (Ekasarana Dharma). The text is not a literal translation from the original Sanskrit into the vernacular but it is an adaptation to the local milieu in language and content.

## Sankardev's transcreation

Srimanta Sankardev transcreated the different sections of the original Bhagavata Purana at different times of his life. They are:

### In the Bara Bhuyan territory

1. **Book VI (*Ajamilopakhayana* part)**
  2. **Book VIII (*Amrta-manthana* part):** Sankardev omits the first and the last chapters of the original twenty-four chapters, and narrates four stories from the rest (*Gajendropakhayana*, *Amrta-manthana*, *Hara-mohana* and *Bali-chalana*). Of these stories the first and third belong to Kirtana-ghoxa, and the fourth is an independent work. Nevertheless, they are all presented together to form a part of the composite. Sankardev develops *Amrta-manthana* freely and embellishes it with poetic sentiments and episodes.
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## In the Koch kingdom

1. **Book I**
2. **Book II**
3. **Book VII (*Bali chalana* part):**
4. **Book IX (lost):**
5. **Book X:** The first part of this book, *Adi-daxama*, was rendered by Sankardev between 1551 and 1558; and he intended it to be the chief authoritative literature of his religious order (Ekasarana dharma) since he inserted a large number of original passages known as *upedesas* (admonitions) in it. Compared to the *Kirtana-ghoxa*, the language here is sober and mature. Though the rendering is largely faithful to the original, it follows the interpretations of Sridhara Swami's *Bhawartha-dipika*. Krishna's sportiveness is increased and philosophical portions are omitted.
6. **Book XI**
7. **Book XII**

From among these sections, Book X, locally called the *daxama*, is particularly popular among the *Mahapuruxiya dharma* works, next only to *kirtan ghoxa*. Sankardev's translations of Book IX are believed to be lost.

The other transcreators are:

- Book IV Ananta Kandali, Aniruddha Kavi, Gopal Charan Dvija
- Book V Aniruddha Kavi
- Book VII Kesava Das
- Book IX Kesava Das
- Book X Ananta Kandali (*Seh* part)

## Differences from the original

The original, which was written in Sanskrit was rendered into Assamese words and idioms of the time by Sankardev, but it was not a verbatim translation. He intentionally left out some sections and summarized or elaborated others, to fit the situation in Assam. He replaced the name of the tribes and flowers by those found in Assam, for instance, thus specifically targeting the local populace. More significantly, whereas the original looks down upon the *shudra* and *kaivarta* castes (*Bhagatava* 12/3/25), Sankardev extols them, envisaging a radically different social order not based on the traditional varna system. Some of the more abstruse philosophical parts were summarized and rendered so that the common people in Assam could understand them.

## Notes

## References

- *Srimad-Bhagavat*, Nalbari: H Dattabaruah and Co.
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# Assamese language

Assamese	
অসমীয়া, ꠘ ꠘꠤꠄꠤꠄꠤ	
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">অসমীয়া</span>	
<b>Native to</b>	India and Bangladesh
<b>Region</b>	Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland - (Assamese or a dialogue variant of Assamese) and some other parts of North-East India and smaller pockets of speakers in Pune - Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Bangalore, Karnataka, Kolkata - West Bengal among others <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Native speakers</b>	16 million (2007) <sup>[2]</sup>
<b>Language family</b>	Indo-European <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indo-Iranian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indo-Aryan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eastern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bengali–Assamese <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Assamese</b></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Dialects</b>	Kamrupi, Goalpariya
<b>Writing system</b>	Assamese script
Official status	
<b>Official language in</b>	<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> India (Assam)
<b>Regulated by</b>	Assam Sahitya Sabha (literature/rhetorical congress of Assam)
Language codes	
<b>ISO 639-1</b>	as
<b>ISO 639-2</b>	asm
<b>ISO 639-3</b>	asm
<b>Linguasphere</b>	59-AAF-w

**Assamese** or **Asamiya** (অসমীয়া, ꠘ ꠘꠤꠄꠤꠄꠤ) is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language used mainly in the state of Assam. It is the official language of Assam. The easternmost of the Indo-Aryan languages; it is spoken by over 13 million native speakers.<sup>[3]</sup> It is also spoken in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and other northeast Indian states. Nagamese, an Assamese-based Creole language is widely used in Nagaland and parts of Assam. Nefamese is an Assamese-based pidgin used in Arunachal Pradesh. Small pockets of Assamese speakers can be found in Bangladesh.

Along with other Eastern Indo-Aryan languages, Assamese evolved at least before 7th century A.D.<sup>[4]</sup> from the Magadhi Prakrit, which developed from a dialect or group of dialects that were close to, but different from, Vedic and Classical Sanskrit.<sup>[5]</sup> Wikipedia:Citing sources Its sister languages include Bengali, Oriya, Maithili, Chittagonian, Sylheti (Cilôṭi), Angika and Bihari languages. It is written with the Assamese script. Assamese is written from left to right and top to bottom, in the same manner as English. A large number of ligatures are possible since potentially all the consonants can combine with one another. Vowels can either be independent or dependent upon a consonant or a consonant cluster.

The word Assamese is an English formation built on the same principle as Sinhalese or Canarese etc. It is based on the English word Assam by which the tract consisting of the Brahmaputra Valley and its adjoining areas are known.<sup>[6]</sup> The people call their state *Ôxôm* and their language *Ôxômiya*.

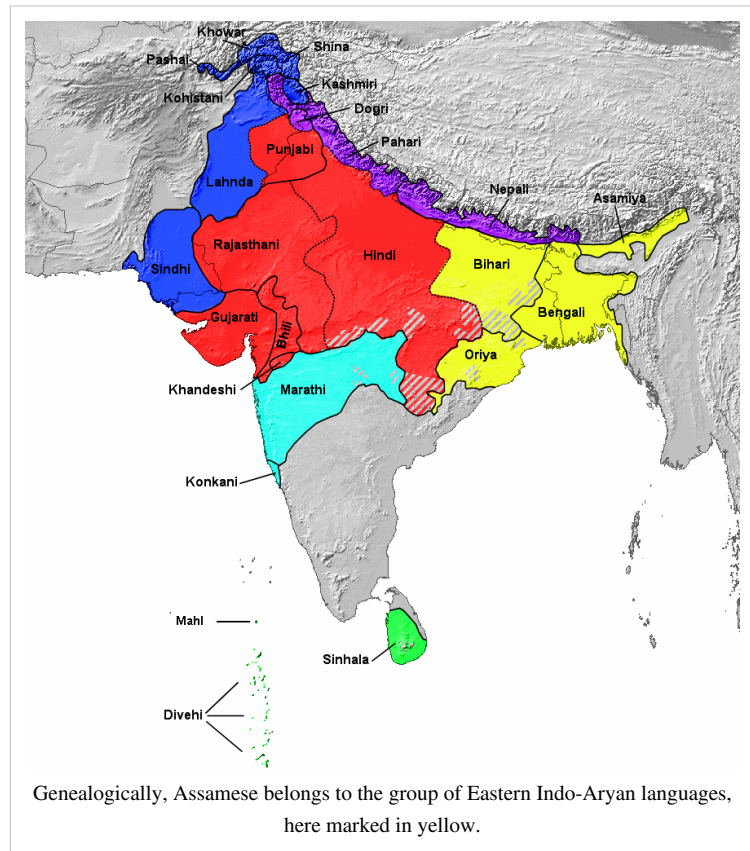
## History

Magadhi Prakrit gave rise to four Apabhramsa dialects regionwise, viz. Radha, Vanga, Kamarupa and Varendra. The Kamarupa dialect spread to the east keeping north of the Ganges and is represented in North-Bengal at *present* by North-Bengali and in the valley of Assam by Assamese.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is generally believed that Assamese and the Kamatapuri lects derive from the Kamarupa dialect of Eastern Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa,<sup>[8]</sup> though some authors contest a close connection of Assamese with Magadhi Prakrit.<sup>[9]</sup> A fully distinguished literary form (poetry) appeared in the fourteenth century in the courts of the Kamata kingdom; in the same century, Madhav Kandali translated the Ramayana into the Assamese (Saptakanda Ramayana) in the eastern court of a Kachari

king. From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, songs (*borgeets*), dramas (*ankiya nat*) and the first prose writings (by Bhattadeva) were composed. The literary language, based on the western dialects of Assam moved to the court of the Ahom kingdom in the seventeenth century,<sup>[10]</sup> where it became the state language. Different kinds of prose developed. According to Goswami (2003), this included "the colloquial prose of religious biographies, the archaic prose of magical charms, the conventional prose of utilitarian literature on medicine, astrology, arithmetic, dance and music, and above all the standardized prose of the Buranjis."<sup>[11]</sup> The literary language, having become infused with the eastern idiom, became the standard literary form in the nineteenth century, when the British adopted it for state purposes. As the political and commercial center shifted to Guwahati after the mid-twentieth century, the literary form moved away from the eastern variety to take its current form.

Though early compositions in completely differentiated Assamese varieties exist from the fourteenth century, the earliest relics of the language can be found in paleographic records of the Kamarupa Kingdom from the fifth century to the twelfth century.<sup>[12]</sup> Assamese linguistic features have been discovered in the ninth-century Buddhist verses called Charyapada, coming from the end of the Apabhramsa period and discovered in 1907 in Nepal. Early compositions matured in the fourteenth century, during the reign of the Kamata king Durlabhnarayana of the Khen dynasty, when Madhav Kandali composed the Saptakanda Ramayana. Since the time of the Charyapada, Assamese has been influenced by the languages belonging to the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic families in Northeast India, and share many common characteristics with them.<sup>[13]</sup>



## Phonology

The Assamese phonemic inventory consists of eight vowels, ten diphthongs, and twenty-one consonants.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Vowels

	Front			Central			Back		
	IPA	ROM	Script	IPA	ROM	Script	IPA	ROM	Script
<b>Close</b>	i	i	ই/ঈ				u	u	উ/ঊ
<b>Near-close</b>							ɯ	ɯ̃	ও
<b>Close-mid</b>	e	e	এ'				o	o	অ'
<b>Open-mid</b>	ɛ	ê	এ				ɔ	ô	অ
<b>Open</b>				a	a	আ			

### Consonants

		Labial			Alveolar			Velar			Glottal		
		IPA	ROM	Script	IPA	ROM	Script	IPA	ROM	Script	IPA	ROM	Script
<b>Nasal</b>		m	m	ম	n	n	ন/ণ	ŋ	ng	ঙ/ং			
<b>Stop</b>	<b>voiceless</b>	p	p	প	t	t	ত/ট	k	k	ক			
	<b>aspirated</b>	p <sup>h</sup>	ph	ফ	t <sup>h</sup>	th	থ/ঠ	k <sup>h</sup>	kh	খ			
	<b>voiced</b>	b	b	ব	d	d	দ/ড	g	g	গ			
	<b>murmured</b>	b <sup>h</sup>	bh	ভ	d <sup>h</sup>	dh	ধ/ঢ	g <sup>h</sup>	gh	ঘ			
<b>Fricative</b>	<b>voiceless</b>				s	s	চ/ছ	x	x	শ/ষ/স	h	h	হ
	<b>voiced</b>				z	z	জ/ঝ/য						
<b>Approximant</b>		w	w	ৱ	l, ɹ	l, r	ল, ৱ						

### Alveolar stops

The Assamese phoneme inventory is unique in the Indic group of languages in its lack of a dental-retroflex distinction among the coronal stops.<sup>[15]</sup> Historically, the dental and retroflex series merged into alveolar stops. This makes Assamese resemble non-Indic languages of Northeast India (such as languages from the Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Chinese languages).<sup>[16]</sup> The only other language to have fronted retroflex stops into alveolars is the closely related eastern dialects of Bengali (although a contrast with dental stops remains in those dialects).

### Voiceless velar fricative

Assamese is unusual among Eastern Indo-Aryan languages for the presence of the /x/ or /χ/,<sup>[17]</sup> historically the MIA sibilant has lenited to /x/ and /h/ (non-initially).<sup>[18]</sup> The derivation of the velar fricative from the coronal sibilant /s/ is evident in the name of the language in Assamese; some Assamese prefer to write [Oxomiya] or [Ôxômiya] instead of [Asomiya] or [Asamiya] to reflect the sound change.<sup>[19]</sup> The voiceless velar fricative is absent in the West Goalpariya dialect as against wide usage in Eastern dialects.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Velar nasal

Assamese and Bengali, in contrast to other Indo-Aryan languages, use the velar nasal (the English *ng* in *sing*) extensively. In many languages, while the velar nasal is commonly restricted to preceding velar sounds, in Assamese it can occur intervocalically. This is another feature it shares with other languages of Northeast India, though in Assamese the velar nasal never occurs word-initially.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Vowel inventory

Eastern Indic languages like Assamese, Bengali, Sylheti, and Oriya do not have a vowel length distinction, but have a wide set of back rounded vowels. In the case of Assamese, there are four back rounded vowels that contrast phonemically, as demonstrated by the minimal set: কলা *kôla* [kɔla] ('deaf'), ক'লা *kola* [kola] ('black'), কলা *kûla* [kɔ̃la] ('lap'), and কুলা *kula* [kula] ('winnowing fan'). The high-mid back rounded vowel /ɔ̃/ is unique in this branch of the language family.

## Writing system

Assamese uses the Assamese script, a variant that traces its descent from the Gupta script. It very closely resembles the Mithilakshar script of the Maithili language, as well as to the Bengali script.<sup>[22]</sup> There is a strong literary tradition from early times. Examples can be seen in edicts, land grants and copper plates of medieval kings. Assam had its own system of writing on the bark of the *saanchi* tree in which religious texts and chronicles were written. The present-day spellings in Assamese are not necessarily phonetic. *Hemkosh*, the second Assamese dictionary, introduced spellings based on Sanskrit, which are now the standard.

## Morphology and grammar

The Assamese language has the following characteristic morphological features:<sup>[23]</sup>

- Gender and number are not grammatically marked
- There is lexical distinction of gender in the third person pronoun.
- Transitive verbs are distinguished from intransitive.
- The agentive case is overtly marked as distinct from the accusative.
- Kinship nouns are inflected for personal pronominal possession.
- Adverbs can be derived from the verb roots.
- A passive construction may be employed idiomatically.

## Negativization process

Verbs in Assamese are negativized by adding /n/ before the verb, with /n/ picking up the initial vowel of the verb. For example:<sup>[24]</sup>

- /na lage/ 'do(es) not want' (1st, 2nd and 3rd persons)
- /ni lik<sup>h</sup>u/ 'will not write' (1st person)
- /nukutu/ 'will not nibble' (1st person)
- /nɛlɛk<sup>h</sup>ɛ/ 'does not write' (3rd person)
- /nɔkɔɔ/ 'do not do' (2nd person)



## Classifiers

Assamese has a huge collection of classifiers, which are used extensively for different kinds of objects that it acquired from Sino-Tibetan languages.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Assamese Classifiers

Classifier	Referent
/zɔn/	males (adult)
/zɔni/	females (women as well as animals)
/goʝaki/	males and females (honorific)
/tu/	inanimate objects or males of animals and men (impolite)
/ti/	inanimate objects or infants
/kʰɔn/	flat square or rectangular objects, big or small, long or short
/kʰɔni/	terrain like rivers, mountains, etc.
/pat/	objects that are thin, flat, wide or narrow.
/sɔta/	objects that are solid
/kɔsa/	mass nouns
/mɔtʰa/	bundles of objects
/mutʰi/	smaller bundles of objects
/ta/	broom-like objects
/gɔs/	wick-like objects
/kʰila/	paper and leaf-like objects
/kʰini/	uncountable mass nouns and pronouns
/dal/	inanimate flexible/stiff or oblong objects; humans (pejorative)

In Assamese, classifiers are generally used in the *numeral + classifier + noun* (e.g. /ezɔn manuh/ 'one man') or the *noun + numeral + classifier* (e.g. /manuh ezɔn/ 'one man') forms.

## Nominalization

Most verbs can be converted into nouns by the addition of the suffix /ɔn/. For example /kʰa/ ('to eat') can be converted to /kʰaɔn/ ('good eating').<sup>[26]</sup>

## Dialects

### Regional dialects

Assamese has a number of regional dialects. Banikanta Kakati identified two broad dialects which he named (1) Eastern and (2) Western dialects,<sup>[27]</sup> of which the Eastern dialect is homogeneous, and prevalent to the east of Guwahati, and the western dialect is heterogeneous. However, recent linguistic studies have identified four dialect groups<sup>[28]</sup> Wikipedia:Citing sources listed below from east to west:

- **Eastern group** in and around Sibsagar district
- **Central group** in Nagaon, Sonitpur, Morigaon districts and adjoining areas
- **Kamrupi group** primarily in the Kamrup region
- **Goalpariya group** in the Goalpara region

## Non-regional dialects

Assamese does not have caste- or occupation-based dialects. In the nineteenth century, the Eastern dialect became the standard dialect because it witnessed more literary activity and it was more uniform from east of Guwahati to Sadiya,<sup>[29]</sup> whereas the western dialects were more heterogeneous.<sup>[30]</sup> Since the nineteenth century, the center of literary activity (as well as of politics and commerce) has shifted to Guwahati; as a result, the standard dialect has evolved considerably away from the largely rural Eastern dialects and has become more urban and acquired western dialectal elements. Most literary activity takes place in this dialect, and is often called the *likhito-bhaxa*, though regional dialects are often used in novels and other creative works.

There also exist some aregional, community-based dialects:

- **Standard dialect** influenced by surrounding centers.
- **Bhakatiya dialect** highly polite, sattra-based dialect with a different set of nominals, pronominals and verbal forms, as well as a preference for euphemism; indirect and passive expressions.<sup>[31]</sup> Some of these features are used in the standard dialect on very formal occasions.
- The fisherman community has a dialect that is used in the central and eastern region.
- The astrologer community of Darrang district has a dialect called *thar* that is coded and secretive. The *ratikhowa* and *bhitarpanthiya* secretive cult-based Vaisnava groups too have their own dialects.
- The Muslim community have their own dialectal preference, with their own kinship, custom and religious terms, with those in east Assam having distinct phonetic features.
- The urban adolescent and youth communities (for example, Guwahati) have exotic, hybrid and local slangs.
- Ethnic speech communities that use Assamese as a second language, often use dialects that are influenced heavily by the pronunciation, intonation, stress, vocabulary and syntax of their respective first languages (*Mising Eastern Assamese, Bodo Central Kamrupi, Rabha Eastern Goalpariya* etc.). Two independent pidgins/creoles, associated with the Assamese language, are Nagamese (used by Naga groups) and Nefamese (used in Arunachal Pradesh).

## Literature

There is a growing and strong body of literature in this language. The first characteristics of this language are seen in the Charyapadas composed in the between the eighth and twelfth centuries. The first examples emerged in writings of court poets in the fourteenth century, the finest example of which is Madhav Kandali's Saptakanda Ramayana. The popular ballad in the form of Ojapali is also regarded as well-crafted. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a flourishing of Vaishnavite literature, leading up to the emergence of modern forms of literature in the late nineteenth century.

## Notes

[1] LIS India ([http://www.lisindia.net/Assamese/Assa\\_demo.html](http://www.lisindia.net/Assamese/Assa_demo.html))

[2] Nationalencyklopedin "Världens 100 största språk 2007" The World's 100 Largest Languages in 2007

[3] 2001 Indian Census report ([http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/Census\\_Data\\_Online/Language/Statement1.htm](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement1.htm))

[4] Sen, Sukumar (1975), *Grammatical sketches of Indian languages with comparative vocabulary and texts, Volume 1*, P 31

[5] Oberlies 2001, p. ?.

[6] Sarma, Satyendranath (1976), *Assamese Literature*, Page 43

[7] Goswami, Golockchandra (1982), *Structure of Assamese*, Page 3

[8] "Dr S K Chatterji basing his conclusion on the materials of accumulated by LSI Vol 1 and other monographs on the Bangali dialects divides eastern Mag. Pkt. and Ap. into four dialect groups. (1) *Radha* dialects which comprehend Western Bengali which gives standard Bangali dialect and Oriya in the South West. (2) *Varendra* dialects of North Central Bengal. (3) *Kamarupa* dialects which comprehend Assamese and the dialects of North Bengal. (4) *Vanga* dialects which comprehend the dialects of East Bengal (ODBL Vol. I. p140)"

[9] There is evidence that the Prakrit of the Kamarupa kingdom differed enough from the Magadhi Prakrit to be identified as either a parallel Kamrupi Prakrit or at least an eastern variety of the Magadha Prakrit

[10] Guha 1983, p. 9.

[11] Goswami 2003, p. 434.

[12] Medhi 1988, pp. 67–63.

- [13] Moral 1997, pp. 43-53.
- [14] Assamese (<http://www.iitg.ernet.in/rcilts/assamese.html>), Resource Centre for Indian Language Technology Solutions, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.
- [15] "Assamese, alone among NIA languages except for Romany, has also lost the characteristic IA dental/retroflex contrast (although it is retained in spelling), reducing the number of articulations, with the loss also of /c/, to three."
- [16] Moral 1997, p. 45.
- [17] The sound varies between velar () and a uvular () pronunciations, depending on the speaker and speech register.
- [18] The word "hare", for example: *śaśka* (OIA) → *χohā* (hare).
- [19] Whereas most fricatives become sibilants in Eastern Goalpariya (*sukh, santi, asa* in Eastern Goalpariya; *xukh, xanti, axa* in western Kamrupi); some use of the fricative is seen as in the word *xi* (for both "he" and "she") and *xap khar* (the snake). The is completely absent in Western Goalpariya
- [20] B Datta - *Linguistic situation in north-east India*, 1982 the distinctive h sound of Assamese is absent in the West Goalpariya dialect
- [21] Moral 1997, p. 46.
- [22] Bara 1981, p. ?.
- [23] Kommaluri, Subramanian & Sagar K 2005.
- [24] Moral 1997, p. 47.
- [25] Moral 1997, pp. 49-51.
- [26] Moral 1997, p. 48.
- [27] "Assamese may be divided dialectically into Eastern and Western Assamese"
- [28] Moral 1992, p. ?.
- [29] Kakati 1941, p. 14-16.
- [30] Goswami 2003, p. 436.
- [31] Goswami 2003, pp. 439-440.

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