RELIGION, POWER AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA'S REFORM MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

This research article examines Srimanta Sankardeva's religious and cultural reform movement as a political project that significantly transformed the socio-political landscape of medieval Assam. While he is popularly celebrated as a saint, poet and cultural architect, the political dimensions of his work are equally profound. The article argues that Sankardeva's introduction of the *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*, his emphasis on egalitarian devotion and his cultural innovations through the *Namghar, Satra, Borgeet* and *Ankiya Naat* collectively functioned as instruments of community reorganization, political integration and identity formation. In a period characterized by caste dominance, ritual monopoly and fragmented power structures, his movement redistributed spiritual authority, weakened Brahmanical ritual power and created new spaces of collective governance. This study also highlights the long-term political impact of Sankardeva's ideology on Assamese identity, state formation under the Ahoms and the development of participatory political culture.

INTRODUCTION:

Religious reform movements in Indian history often carried implicit political agendas, influencing state power, social relations and public life. Srimanta Sankardeva's reform movement in Assam is one such example where spiritual ideas intertwine with political consequences. Born in 1449, Sankardeva lived during a time when Assam's society was fragmented by caste hierarchies, tribal divisions, internal conflicts and shifting political orders. Against this backdrop, Sankardeva introduced a monotheistic, egalitarian devotional system known as *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*. While his primary aim was spiritual transformation, his reforms also initiated a political restructuring of Assamese society. His teachings not only offered an alternative religious ideology but created new forms of power relations, community participation and cultural identity. This article explores his reform movement through a political lens, arguing that Sankardeva was not only a religious visionary but also a transformative political thinker whose ideas influenced governance, identity and social cohesion in Assam.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM:

The 15th–16th century Assam was a mosaic of several ethnic groups; Ahoms, Koch, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Borahis and numerous tribes each with its own customs and political formations. The Ahom kingdom was consolidating power but had not yet achieved complete

socio-cultural integration. Conflicts among petty kings, tribal chieftains and caste groups created a politically unstable environment.

Caste and Ritual Dominance: The Brahmanical system exercised significant influence over social and religious life. Rituals were complex, expensive and inaccessible to lower castes and tribal communities. This control over religious practice translated into political authority, as priestly classes shaped social norms, legitimized power and mediated public life.

Cultural Fragmentation: Linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences limited the possibility of a unified Assamese identity. Cultural expression was localized rather than collective and no common sacred or artistic tradition connected the region's diverse populations.

Political Instability: The Ahoms, though powerful militarily, faced difficulty integrating the diverse populations under a single cultural or political ideology. The absence of a shared spiritual framework hindered state consolidation.

It is within this socio-political environment that Sankardeva's reform movement emerged as a movement that addressed not only spiritual needs but also political challenges.

EKA SARANA NAMA DHARMA AS A POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Sankardeva's *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* was structured around devotion to a single deity, Lord Krishna. This monotheistic focus simplified worship and removed the necessity of priestly mediation. Yet beneath its spiritual simplicity lay profound political implications.

- **Challenge to Ritual Authority**: By rejecting elaborate rituals, animal sacrifice, Tantric practices and idol worship, Sankardeva questioned the foundations of Brahmanical dominance. Traditional rituals were the gateway through which the priestly class exercised authority. The shift toward *nama-kirtana* directly threatened these structures. Sankardeva's emphasis on internal devotion rather than external ritual effectively moved spiritual power away from ritual specialists and into the hands of common people. This was a radical political move that destabilized caste-based monopoly over spiritual capital.

- **Spiritual Equality as Political Equality:** Eka Sarana Nama Dharma promoted the idea that devotion was open to all regardless of caste, gender or ethnicity. This egalitarian spiritual philosophy translated into new political consciousness, allowing lower castes and tribal communities to participate equally in collective worship and social life. Spiritual equality created a parallel sense of **political equality**, as individuals accustomed to subordination began to assert moral and communal agency. This shift from hierarchical identity to collective belonging had long-term effects on Assamese social and political behavior.

- **Emotional Devotion as a Tool for Social Mobilization:** The preaching of love, humility and devotion created a broad emotional appeal that drew mass participation. A movement with such mass support naturally became a powerful political force capable of shaping public opinion and social values.

NAMGHAR: THE BIRTHPLACE OF A PUBLIC SPHERE IN ASSAM:

Perhaps, the most politically significant institution created by Sankardeva was the **Namghar**. Though primarily a prayer hall, it also served as a political and social assembly space.

➢ **Community Governance:** Villagers gathered in the Namghar to discuss social issues, settle disputes and manage community affairs. Decisions were made collectively rather

than by caste elites or feudal authorities. This participatory model of governance functioned as:

- a village parliament
- a forum for consensus-building
- a mechanism for conflict resolution

Centuries before modern democratic systems emerged, the Namghar acted as a grassroots public sphere where ordinary people exercised political agency.

➢ **Limiting Caste Power:** Since the Namghar was open to all, it broke the monopoly of caste-based religious spaces. Brahmanical authority diminished as people began turning to community-based leadership rather than priestly direction.

3. Cultural Integration: Through collective singing, drama and readings of sacred texts, the Namghar created a shared cultural memory. This strengthened group cohesion, making it easier for political authorities such as the Ahom state, to maintain unity across ethnic boundaries.

SATRA: INSTITUTIONALIZING POWER AND CULTURE:

Sankardeva's establishment of Satra's further strengthened his reform movement. Over time, these monastic institutions evolved into centers of education, administration, cultural preservation and political influence.

➢ **Administrative Functions:** Satra's often controlled land, organized labour and supervised economic activities. Monks regulated community behavior, provided moral guidance and mediated social conflicts. Many Satra's developed structured administrative hierarchies, similar to miniature states.

➢ **Influence over Rural Politics:** Village heads frequently deferred to Satra authorities in matters of dispute resolution, cultural behavior and social discipline. This gave Satra's considerable influence in shaping local political culture.

➢ **Cultural Standardization as Nation-Building:** Through Borgeet, Satriya dance and religious dramas, Satra's created standardized forms of art and literature, thus consolidating Assamese cultural identity. Cultural standardization is a key component of political unity, as it provides shared symbols and collective memory.

➢ **Negotiation with the Ahom State:** Though initially viewed with suspicion, Satra's eventually gained royal patronage. The Ahom rulers recognized that these institutions could help unify the population and promote social order. Thus, Sankardeva's movement became aligned with state interests, further expanding its political role.

CULTURAL REFORM AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION:

1. Use of Vernacular Language: Sankardeva's choice to write in Assamese rather than Sanskrit democratized knowledge. By strengthening Assamese as a literary and devotional language, he created linguistic unity across diverse ethnic groups.

2. Drama and Music as Mass Communication: Sankardeva used visual and musical arts such as Ankiya Naat and Borgeet to communicate moral and spiritual messages. These performances reached illiterate audiences and shaped collective morality and social values.

3. Construction of a Shared Cultural Heritage:

Through narratives of Krishna and the Bhakti tradition, Sankardeva created a shared cultural memory for Assamese society. Cultural memory fosters loyalty, shared identity and political unity all essential elements in the formation of a cohesive community.

CONCLUSION:

Srimanta Sankardeva's reform movement must be reinterpreted as a decisive political intervention in the history of Assam. By restructuring religious authority, democratizing community life and fostering cultural unity, he transformed the foundations of Assamese society. His innovations *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, Namghar, Satra, Borgeet* and *Ankiya Naat* were not merely religious or artistic achievements, but tools that reshaped power relations, challenged caste hierarchy and introduced participatory forms of governance. The political legacy of Sankardeva continues to influence Assamese identity, state-society relations and public life even today. He remains one of the most significant political architects of pre-modern Assam, whose reforms transcended spirituality and laid the ideological foundation for a unified and culturally vibrant Assamese society.

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