

CHAPTER – IV

NEO-VAIṢṆAVISM OF ŚAṆKARADEVA AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS

The cult of Viṣṇu worship is a major religious trend of the Eastern India as well as the other parts of India. The Indian religious life came across the downstream flow of *Vaiṣṇavism*. So, the Vaiṣṇavite thought has been a major religious trend that has influenced Indian culture. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was the propagator of the Neo-*Vaiṣṇavism* of Assam. To save the distorted socio-religious condition of Assam, in the 15th century, Śaṅkaradeva initiated the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement. His Neo-Vaiṣṇavite religion is known as the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, which means supreme devotional surrender to one God, that is, ‘Kṛṣṇa’ who is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The main principle of his religion is to give social recognition to all irrespective of caste, creed or status, Śaṅkaradeva was not only a religious propagator, he was also a great socio-cultural reformer of Assam.

4.1 : Life and Works of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva :

Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was a great social reformer, who sanskritised the ethnic groups of the volatile North East India and assimilated them with the national main-stream of India. Śaṅkaradeva was a cultural maestro too.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was born in Śaka 1371, (A.D. 1449) in *Śūdrakāyastha* feudal *Bhūñā* family, at *Ālipukhurī* near Bardowā of Nagaon district. He was called by his followers a *Mahāpuruṣa* (a great soul, the manifestation of God, *Viṣṇu- Kṛṣṇa*). His

father was Kusumbar Bhūñā who was ruler of the kingdom in middle Assam. Śaṅkaradeva lost his parents early in his childhood and his paternal grandmother Kherasūtī had take care of the child. Many are the miracles associated with the birth of Śaṅkaradeva. He enjoyed a life of ease and luxury in his early life upto the age of twelve. Śaṅkaradeva's boyhood was evidently that of a normal boy with all sort of boyish pranks and merry making.¹

As a strong energetic youth, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva caught wild birds, jackals and he loved ever to live an open air life, going after the cattle, swimming across the strong currents of the Brahmaputra, wrestling with his play-mates and playing all the time.² He has no other passion, but sports and games. Though he caught birds, deer and porpoises, he did it only for amusement and left these creatures immediately without any injury. One day, his grand-mother sitting at the table reminded him of the glorious tradition of his family and how he made a sad contrast by proving himself to be no better than a street urchin even at the age of twelve! Śaṅkara was cut to the quick. He submitted himself to the control of his grandmother, who now took him to a renowned pandit Mahendra Kandali and put him into Kandali's boarding school.³ Śaṅkaradeva is said to have been admitted to the school on an auspicious, Thursday in the month of *Bhādra*.⁴

After learning the alphabet within a few days of his admission into the school, Śaṅkaradeva is said to have composed a hymn called *Komal Gītā* (soft song, literally,

1. Chouchury, P. (2013). *The Concepts of Puruṣa, Prakṛti And Līlā in Śaṅkaradeva's Philosophy*. P. 1.

2. Neog; M. (2011). *Śaṅkaradeva – The Great Integrator*; P. 5

3. Ibid.

4. Bezbaroa; L. N. (1963). *Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śaṅkaradeva aru Śrī Mādhāvadeva*. 2nd Ed. P. 17.

song composition having no use of vowels except the first ‘a’) glorifying the God. The hymn appears to be a proof of his profound knowledge and divine power, besides poetic genius. It goes like this–

*karatala kamala kamala-dala-nayana
bhava dava dahana gahana vana Sayana
napara napara para satarata gamana
sabhayamabhaya bhaya mama hara satataya
kharatara bara sara hata dasa-vadan
khagacara nagadhara phanadhara sayana
jagadaghamapahara bhava bhaya tarana
para pada laya kara kamalaja nayana.*

Having seen the composition, the teacher Mahendra Kandali was highly surprised, and he could guess the future greatness of his young pupil.⁵

One day, Śaṅkara was sleeping in a school house all alone after the class and a large cobra came and extended its hood over the head of Śaṅkara to protect him from the rays of the sun.⁶ When the teacher approached, the serpent crept away. From that day, Mahendra Kandali had firm belief in the divinity of the young student and reverently conferred to Śaṅkara the epithet of ‘deva’ which was generally used by the *Brāhmaṇs*. He further asked all the school boys to call him Śaṅkaradeva and exempted him from doing any manual work in the school.

Within a few years, Śaṅkaradeva mastered all branches of learning like the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Tantras*, the *Purāṇas*, the

5. Deva Goswami, Kesavananda (2007). *Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva*. Pp. 8, 9.

6. Bezbaroa L.N. (1963). *Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śaṅkaradeva aru Śrī Mādhāvadeva* (2nd ed.). P. 18.

*Samhitās, Kāvyaś, grammar and lexicon;*⁷ and then Śaṅkaradeva became an unerring scholar.⁸ He was so sharp and devoted student that he could easily complete the course of studies within less time than was required ordinarily. During that period, Śaṅkaradeva studied some works on *Yoga* and was attracted to that. By exercising *Yogic* power, Śaṅkaradeva is reported to have spent many hours under water. But later on, when Śaṅkaradeva came to know the supremacy of the Bhāgavata-bhakti, he gave up the practice of *Yoga*.⁹ It was probably for this *Yogic* practice in his early youth that Śaṅkaradeva possessed an extra-ordinary sound health and had a long life of nearly one hundred and twenty years.

Śaṅkaradeva spent nearly ten years in his school. On completion of education, he assumed his administrative responsibility and also started preaching his own ideology.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva got an institutional structure built at Tembuwani in 1468, which came to be known as *Thān* over time. It consists of a prayer-house called *Kīrttan-ghar*, which is surrounded by huts lived in by the devotees. These are called *Hāṭī*. The *Kīrttan ghar* is popularly known as *Nāmghar* these days.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva did not renounce world. He himself married twice. He first married *Sūryavatī* in 1470, daughter of Harivara-giri Kāyastha.¹⁰ But *Sūryavatī* died in 1474, just nine months after giving birth to a daughter, Manu. Then the saint

7. Lekharu, Upendra Chandra. (1964). *Kathā Guru Carit* P. 18.

8. Thatkur Daityari (1869). *Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva- Mādhāvadeva Carita*, ed. by R.M. Nath; Sylhet. Ch. IV, v. 52.

9. Ibid, Chap. VI, v. 60.

10. Dvarika. v. 389.

11. Deva Goswami, Kesavananda (2001). *manapuruṣa śaṅkaraadeva*; p. 12.

married *Kāḷindī* in 1503. They had one daughter Rukmiṇī and three sons Rāmānanda, Kamal Lochan, Hari Caran. Rāmānanda was trained in accountancy and manuscriptology. Though Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva had to lead a life of house holder, still he kept himself engaged in intellectual activities rather than in worldly affairs.¹¹

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's contribution in the field of Assamese literature is undoubtedly unsurpassable till today. He used different art-forms for the propagation of his faith. In his first ever dramatic performances *Cihna-yātrā* at Bardowā, he painted scenes of seven *Vaikuṇṭhas* on *tulāpāt* and used them as backdrops. He authored six plays. These were *Patnī Prasāda*, *Kāliyā Damana*, *Kelī Gopāla*, *Rukmiṇī Haraṇa*, *Pārijāt Haraṇa*, and *Śrī Rām Vijaya*. The first of these plays, *Patnī Prasāda* was written while the saint was living at Gajalasuti temporally. The last play *Śrī Rām Vijaya* was written as well as directed by the saint only a few days before his demise. He used the *Vrajāwali* language in his plays as well as his devotional songs *Bargīt*. The plots of Śaṅkaradeva's plays are all taken from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* except in the case of *Rāma-Vijaya*, where the story is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The plays of Śaṅkaradeva are popularly known as *Aṅkīyānāṭs* which means dramatic compositions in single acts. The purpose of Śaṅkaradeva's plays was not so much to create dramatic effect but to evoke a devotional attitude in the audience. Therefore, plot, characterisation and dialogue are all subordinated to the dramatist's main purpose of creating the sentiment of *Bhakti*. Songs and verses cover the major part of the drama.¹²

12. Barua, Girish (2011). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and His philosophy*. (ed.) P. 42.

13. Ibid, P. 42-43.

Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti-Ratnākara* is a doctrinal treatise in Sanskrit. It is compilation with commentary. It is a collection of 571 *ślokas* from more than 20 sources of which the main source is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This compilation is an ample proof of Śaṅkaradeva's wide learnings and analytical scholarship.¹³

The translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* into Assamese was a great task for Śaṅkaradeva. He drew inspiration chiefly from the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* which contained the essence of the *Vedānta* Philosophy and other *Vaiṣṇavite purāṇas*.

Kīrttana Ghoṣā is a towering work of Śaṅkaradeva. It is a selective collection of twenty six Verse or *ghoṣā* and comprises 2261 couplets of diverse metres. The general names of the narrative poems composed by Śaṅkaradeva are *ākhyāna*, *upākhyāna*, *kīrtana*, *varṇanā* and *vṛttānta*. Most of the verses have been adopted from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Śaṅkaradeva composed *Guṇamālā* at the request of king Naranārāyaṇa and it is one of the last works of Śaṅkaradeva.¹⁴

Besides these, other works of Śaṅkaradeva, which are also great are – six devotional *Kāvya*s, viz.- *Nimi-navasiddha-saṁvāda*, *Bhakti-pradīpa*, *Hariścandra Upākhyāna*, *Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa kāvya*, *Kurukṣetra*, *Uttarā-kāṇḍarāmāyaṇa*.

Other works are – *Bhaṭimā*, *Bargīt*, etc. Śaṅkaradeva took to art. Painting was his passion. He painted a picture of heaven as imagined by him. Gods and goddesses were also painted in their respective places and positions. It was the result of his creative imagination. He named the grand painting *Chihnayātrā*. This grand painting was presented to the spectators in a dramatic situation contrived by him. This painting served as the background of a speechless play, wherein the Master himself enacted the

14. Dutta, Deepanjali (2002). *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement : Assam and Orissa*. PP. 13-14.

role of God. Śaṅkaradeva's *Chihnayātrā* is a painting and the background for a speechless plays, perhaps the first play in the history of Assamese drama. This grand painting contained the pictures of seven heavens as envisioned by him.¹⁵

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva preached that there was only one God, who controlled the entire creation and remained within all sentient and insentient beings. He observed that worship of innumerable deities acted as a hindrance for attaining the final beatitude. Śaṅkaradeva began preaching devotion to one and only God, Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. He talked of universal brotherhood and advocated for integration of different ethnic groups in the society. He preached equality among the people. He gave equal status to all his disciples. The *Śūdras*, the Muslims, the Tribals— all were initiated by him in his path-breaking religious system that came to be known as *Eka-Śāraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Moreover the saint reduced ethnic conflicts from the valley by bringing about amity among different tribes. That was an important achievement from the viewpoint of social reform as peace was necessary for development.¹⁶ The ethnic groups subscribed to distinct cultures and ways of life. The heterogeneous population of the valley came together, thanks to a common culture and a common thought evolved by Śaṅkaradeva. Even those, who did not embrace his ideology, accepted the cultural resources created by him.

The unity among the multi-ethnic population of the valley was achieved by the strong emphasis on equality of all people in the Vaiṣṇavite *Eka-Śāraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* cult founded by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva. He enjoined upon all his disciples to

15. Pathak, Dayananda (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. PP. 89-90.

16. Borkakoti, Sanjib Kumar (2012). *Srimanta Sankaradeva : An Epoch Maker*. P. 53.

treat every creature as a manifestation of the one and only God, Lord Kṛṣṇa. One should be kind to all creatures as God resides in every creatures, the latter being only an extension of one's own self. The casteless society advocated by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva became a stepping stone for a classless society. Ultimately Śaṅkaradeva established an egalitarian society.

In the time of Śaṅkaradeva, women had no honour. They were taken as the objects of enoyment. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva redeemed women from that degraded state of being object of enjoyment, and elevated her to the equal status of men in the performance of religion of devotion. Women had the right to arrange offerings in the *kīrttan-ghar*, perform *nāma-kīrttana* etc. in the *Eka-Śāraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva initiated many women in his *Eka-Śāraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*.¹⁷

Śaṅkaradeva preached his ideology in the rest of India during his twelve years long pilgrimage in 1481-1493. Ultimately in 1493, Śaṅkaradeva returned home at forty four years of age and he sowed the seed of *Bhakti* movement throughout Northern as well as Eastern India.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and his followers engaged themselves in the work of propagating knowledge and wisdom in their own way. The songs, plays, prayers and philosophical writings, which were authored by Śaṅkaradeva contained a major portion of the course materials prevalent in the schools of that time. His educational programmers were not restricted to religious aspect only. Śaṅkaradeva imparted these mainly to his disciples; but gradually these knowledges were passed on to the people at large.

17. Ibid. PP. 56, 57.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva could not live in a place for long period due to the socio-political disturbances. He had to leave Bordowā in 1516 following ethnic conflicts in the area. Then he and his fellow devotees as well as relatives lived in Rowtā and Gangmow for few months each, finally settling in Dhuwahātā in upper Assam in 1522. Here he met his future successor Mādhavadeva, a great scholar and merchant. Mādhavadeva's arrival gave a new fillip to the order. But the increasing popularity of the Vaiṣṇavite philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva made him the target of the Brāhmin priests, who lodged numerous complaints to the Āhom kings. Thus, royal persecutions started. Śaṅkaradeva's son-in-law Hari was executed and Mādhavadeva was kept under house arrest for six months in Āhom capital. All these harassments prompted the saint to leave for Koch kingdom in lower Assam. Śaṅkaradeva settled at Pātbausī in 1542 after short stays at Chunporā and Kumārkuchī. The Koch king Naranārāyaṇa was a great scholar and he showed enormous respect to the saint. The Koch General Chilarāi soon became a disciple of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva. In 1550, Śaṅkaradeva went on his second pilgrimage along with one hundred twenty disciples. This time they visited Purī and came into contact with holy men from different parts of the country.¹⁸ This time Mādhavadeva was also with him and served the Master all through his travel. They travelled for six months only due to political instability in the peninsula. Several new devotees enriched the order in lower Assam. Among them, the important were Dāmodaradeva, Harideva, Śrī Rām, Goviṇḍa and Nārāyanadās Thākur. A Muslim

18. Goswami, K.D. *History and Development of the Puruṣa Saṁhati Sect of Assam Vaiṣṇavism*. Ph.D thesis (MS). P. 68.

tailor Chāndsāi also embraced Vaiṣṇavism from Śaṅkaradeva in Kochbihār and later came over to Pātbausī. Thus, a new movement was started from Pātbausī.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva prepared a great piece of textile which was known as *Vṛndāvanī Vastra* in 1554, at the request of the king Naranārāyaṇa. He designed the art in that cloth, which depicted the life story of Lord Kṛṣṇa. It was sixty cubit long. Special yarns were supplied by the Koch king for weaving this cloth. It took six months to complete the work and it was delivered to Naranārāyaṇa in early part of 1555. Naranārāyaṇa was highly pleased with Śaṅkaradeva, who fulfilled several other requests also of the king. One of these was the abridgement of the scripture *Bhāgavata* that is *Guṇamālā*. This abridged version is kept in the alter of *Kīrttanghar*.

Over time, the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* received wide acceptance in the entire Brahmaputra valley. Even the Āhom kingdom was gradually won over to this egalitarian religion. The Brāhmin priests looked down upon the Āhoms as belonging to low caste and would not partake of offerings by the king before the deity. This led to a dislike for Brāhminism among Āhoms. As a result, many of them changed their loyalty to the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Thus, people of both the Āhom and the Koch kingdom accepted it as the predominant faith. Eventually Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva left for heavenly abode in 1568 at Kochbihar. He knew it beforehand and choose Mādhavadeva as his successor.

4.2 : The Vaiṣṇavite Religious Trends of India :

Religious belief is as old as the beginning of human civilization. The fear of uncontrollable natural activities as well as awe-inspiring and pleasing natural phenomena necessitated the worship of nature in different form and led to the

beginning of the religious activities in society. In respect of religious belief, Vaiṣṇavism is a form of monotheism, which believes in the one personal God Viṣṇu, not only the preserver, but as above every other god. Vaiṣṇavism is as old as *Ṛgveda* and it is mentioned that Viṣṇu was identical with god sun.¹⁹

According to Vaiṣṇavite culture, Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate reality. The worship of Viṣṇu leads to the realisation of the highest spiritual goal of a religion. The valued character which developed through the practice of Vaiṣṇavism has a great significance for cultivation of a good religion or cultivation of ethical virtues. Every religion emphasises on moral life expecting to develop ethical virtues such as faith in God, honesty, proper social behaviours, truth speaking *ahiṃsā* or non-injury to other living being etc. which are fundamental ethical concept of every religion. The ultimate aim of *Vaiṣṇava* is an eternal life of bliss (*ānanda*) in the spiritual realm of *Vaikuṇṭha* which lies beyond this temporary world of illusion (*māyā*).²⁰

The *Vaiṣṇava* cult that swept along whole India in medieval era is popularly called Bhakti-Movement as it is based on complete devotion (*bhakti*) to Lord Viṣṇu and His incarnations as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa; but it was not a purely religious movement. Simply saying the Bhakti-Movement is the union of the human soul with supreme-being through devotion. The seed of Bhakti-Movement in India was sown between the 7th and the 12th century A.D. nourished by Śaiva Nāyānar and Vaiṣṇava Ālwar sects. The Ālwars were a group of twelve devotees, belonging to the Pallava period in the Tamil region. Members of this 12 devotees group came from different social status.

19. Neog, M.(1987). *Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva, Rgveda*. 1/12/19.

20. Mahanta, Bap Chandra (1999). *Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva*. P. 42.

All of them were dedicated devotees who moved around the people. They moved from place to place and sang the glory of Lord Viṣṇu. Their songs and hymns are collectively described as *Nalayira Prabandham*.²¹

Every individual Ālwar made his or her contribution to the *bhakti* cult. They were for the liberation of the human soul from the cycle of life and death. They taught that only through pure devotion to Lord Viṣṇu, one could get rid of endless births and deaths. Their single-minded devotion to Lord Viṣṇu paved the way for monotheism. The Ālwars believed that, service to Lord Viṣṇu implied parallel service to the devotees of God. A person's attachment to worldly life hinders his attachment with the Lord. Such worldly attachments generate selfishness that finds expression in words like 'me', 'mine' and so forth. People should do everything only for the sake of the Lord. A man's total existence ought to be dedicated to the Lord. The Ālwars had no faith in caste barriers and social status. Every man is equal before the Lord. Hence, the Lord's grace is available to every man.

The Ālwars were followed by the *Ācāryas* who had some distinct differences with the beliefs and operational styles of the Ālwars. The *Ācāryas* promoted the Tāmil scriptures alongside Sanskrit scriptures. They said that *bhakti* must also be accompanied by *Jñāna* and *Karma* (Knowledge and action). They were orthodox in their religious practices. Natha Muni (824-924 A.D.) was one of the distinguished *Ācāryas* of the time. Nātha Muni is said to have been founded a distinct pontifical order within Vaiṣṇava culture. Besides the leading *Ācāryas* like Nātha Muni, Yamunā, Rāmānuja and others developed Vaiṣṇavism in a distinct line.

21. Pathak, Dayananda (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. Pp. 11-12.

Yāmunācārya followed Nātha Muni. This sage established the fundamentals of *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, which were subsequently developed and elaborated upon by Rāmānuja.²² Rāmānuja established the role of personal God. In the *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, the individual souls tend to retain their identity. The importance of the individual soul is not totally ignored or bypassed under it. During the final years of his life, Rāmānuja organised his devotees for the propagation of *Viśiṣṭādvaita* in every nook and corner of the country.

In Bengal, The Bhakti Movement took definite shape under the spiritual leadership of Caitanya (*Gaurāṅga*). Under his spiritual leadership, the Vaiṣṇavite Movement swept every nook and corner of Bengal. Chaitanya visited different religious shrines and finally settled in Purī. At Gayā, he happened to meet *Īśvara Purī*, who subsequently initiated him into the *Bhakti* cult. After initiation, Chaitanya became a different person, always possessed with a spiritual experience of having communion with Lord Kṛṣṇa. He took to *saṁkīrtana* all the time and was thereby transported to an ecstatic state of mind. The Bengal Vaiṣṇavism rests on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa duo so much so that Chaitanya started considering himself to be Rādhā, always pining for Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Vaiṣṇavism is founded on pure devotion, without any scholarship. Perhaps because of this factor, the common people found in Vaiṣṇavism or *bhakti* ways to their happiness and salvation.

The post-Rāmānujācārya era, Swami Rāmānanda, who was a disciple of Rāmānuja, found himself torn between two gigantic situations. The first was the

22. Ibid. P. 14.

invasion and consolidation of the Muslim rule in North India. The second was the degeneration of Hinduism engineered by the high caste people for vested interests.²³

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the great Vaiṣṇavite saint of Assam, considered himself to be the *kiṅkar* (slave) of Kṛṣṇa. This treatment is called *dāśya bhakti*. *Mādhuryya* is another form of love between the Lord and his devotees. In *Mādhuryya*, the devotee treats the Lord as his or her husband or lover. Under this category of devotees, Mirā Bāi, Caitanya and many others are included.

Vallabhācārya (1479-1531) is considered to be an exponent of pure monism, i.e., *Śuddhāvaitavāda*. He was for renunciation of all the mundane pleasures of life. Only through strict self-control, one can have the spiritual experiences in life according to him.

Kabīr Das, a disciple of Ramānanda, sought to synthesize the best features of Hinduism with same of Islam.

Sūrdās, Mirābāi, Chaitanya, Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhabdeva and their committed disciples were the pillars of the Vaiṣṇavite Movement. Their individual and collective efforts changed the entire scenario of the country, cutting across the barriers of caste, creed, faith and language.

Under the climate, generated by the Vaiṣṇavite Movement, Guru Nānak, the founder of Sikhism, became a powerful force, and an agent of change in Indian society. He was a believer in the equality of all men and also in the unity of God. Guru Nānak stood for simplicity and plain living supported by pure devotion. He worked as an agent of change whenever change was historically indispensable to put the caste-

23. Ibid. PP. 21. 22.

rideen Indian society on the right track. He was one of the soldiers of the Vaiṣṇavite Movement during its shaping time.²⁴

4.3 : Neo-Viṣṇavism in Assam Propagated by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva :

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement, spearheaded by Śaṅkaradeva is great socio cultural revolution in Assam, which plays an important role to create social cohesion among the people of Assam. When the society was in turmoil, fragmented, then Śaṅkaradeva spread his ideas and started an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam. He established some religious institutions, which were used as powerful instruments to bring about a great reform among the people of Assam. The impact of this movement cut deep into the fabric of the Assamese society transcending all barriers of caste and tribe.

4.3.1 : Historical Background of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam :

The whole of Assam, from the eastern-most Dikkaravāsīnī region to the river Karatoyā in the west, disintegrated into several kingdoms, some of which did not survive more than a few decades. The political instability brought about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also. Assam in the 15th century presented a picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Āryan tribes having distinct manner, customs and religious beliefs. Those, who professed Hinduism, loosely adhered to Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism. Religious rites were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbals, night vigils on virgin worship.²⁵

24. Ibid. P. 25

25. Kakati, B.K. (1978). *A New Life, Literature and a State - in Śaṅkaradeva— Studies in Culture*, B.P. Chaliha, (ed.) P. 12

It was based on the philosophy of palate and sensual pleasures. The economically backward classes and socially downtrodden became the victims of such ghastly practices. Against this backdrop, Śaṅkaradeva appeared on the scene. Śaṅkaradeva undertook the difficult task as a reformer in Assamese society. He propounded Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. It occupies an important place among the different *bhakti* cults of India due to its unique and innovative character that shared the values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy.²⁶

The movement of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was a great event in the North-Eastern India in the 15th-16th centuries and its founder Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva was a man of genius. The Assamese people look upon him as an incarnation of God, i.e. - 'Viṣṇu'. He gave Assam a new age, a new life, a new culture and above all, a new state. Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Viṣṇavism is also known as *Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma*.

Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was based on the *Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*. He brought the new message of a new religion of love as he proclaimed the eternal dharma based on truth and love. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva's does not support the worship of any other gods and goddesses. In this religion, there is only one God and that is 'Lord Kṛṣṇa'. Who is the Supreme Reality.

Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva was also based on democratic principles and tolerant spirits. He kept no distinction between caste and creed; between rich and poor and between high and low. In other words, in this way, Śaṅkaradeva wanted to make a classless society through his religion. He organised the Vaiṣṇavite society with the help of three components as *Nāma-Kīrtana*, *Thān* and *Nāmghar*. For the spread of

26. Bhuyan, Abhijit (2008). *Śaṅkaradeva and Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam*, 15 May, Ishani, II; P. 3

Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva had to compose songs, write dramas and other works of literature.

Worship of Viṣṇu was prevalent in Assam earlier also, but Vaiṣṇavism that was introduced by Śaṅkaradeva, known as Neo-Vaiṣṇavism brought in the wake, lot of churning in the society and affected all aspects of life in Assam – social, cultural and political. So, this came to be known as Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. There are four important scriptures of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. These are – *Kīrttān Ghoṣā* and *Daśama* of Śaṅkaradeva and *Nāma-Ghoṣā* and *Bhakti Ratnāvali* of Mādhavadeva. Through Neo-Vaiṣṇavism Śaṅkaradeva preached *dāśya bhakti* in Assam, in which the relation between God and the devotee is like master and the servant.²⁷

4.3.2 : The Impact of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism on Socio-Religious-Cultural Life of the Assamese People :

The arrival of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism gave a new dimension to the Assamese society. Prior to this, people believed in idol worship, practiced animal sacrifice and maintained a host of other superstitions. In such a scenario, Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was completely different from the prevailing norm. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is not simply a religion. Rather it is a conglomeration of different ideologies. It ushered in an era of various social and cultural reforms in Assam. Through Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva advocated the worship of a supreme God Viṣṇu, Who was the expression of all forms of God. Hence, it is strictly a monotheistic religion. Worship is done

27. Poddar, Satyadeo (2016). *Place of Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam in the Bhakti Movement of India : A Historical Comparison*, Published in Proceeding Volume of the National Seminar on the same topic; Edited by Dr. Nara Kanta Adhikary, Guwahati, 2016, PP. 19-21.

mainly by uttering the name of God, worshipped in the form of Kṛṣṇa or Hari. Idol worship is completely absent. It is also against all forms of animal sacrifice.

The main aim of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is to bring the common people from a debased form of *śākta* Tāntricism to the pure monotheism. In this respect, Śaṅkaradeva did not accomplish this through an organized propaganda. Rather, he thought that the best way of reforming the religious life of common people was not to attack what was evil; but to present to them what was good and to make it appealing to their imagination.²⁸

Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism rested not on discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but its emphasis was more on ethnic, integration, social reforms and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region. At that time, the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden as it was. It was a revolution in the sense that Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith; but a way of life. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism stands out among the different *bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy. Śaṅkaradeva propagated his doctrine of *bhakti* based on the principle of universal brotherhood to the caste ridden society. While discarding the caste codes, Śaṅkaradeva gave more emphasis on the matter of personal cleanliness both inward and outward and correct social behaviour for the purpose of establishing social harmony in society and for promoting fellow feeling.²⁹

28. Barua, Girish (ed.). (2011). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and His philosophy*, P.64.

29. Chaliha, B. P. (1978). *Śaṅkaradeva Studies in Culture*. P. 29

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is also known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hāri-Nāma-Dharma*; it is the religion of surrendering oneself with intense and selfless devotion to the One Supreme Power, that is ‘Viṣṇu’, who manifests Himself in various incarnations in different ages. Of all the incarnations, that of Sri Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme. So, it can be said that complete surrender to that ‘Sri Kṛṣṇa’, who is the Supreme One is the basic principle of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Assam.³⁰

Śaṅkaradeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu; it is called *Eka-Śaraṇa*. The Lord Kṛṣṇa can be worshipped solely by uttering His various names (Nāma). There are nine kinds of *bhakti* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but Śaṅkaradeva considered only *śravaṇa* and *kīrttana* modes of *bhakti* or devotion to be sufficient. As the sacred door of his religion was open to all, he also preached the irrespectiveness of caste and creed. The flavour of *Hari-nāma*, which was like a river of nectar flew through the universe by his preaching. Śaṅkaradeva brought the principle of *Eka-Śaraṇa* from the *Bhagavadgītā* and chanting Kṛṣṇa *nāma* from the *Sahasra-nāma khaṇḍa* of the *Padma-purāṇa* and that of *sat-saṅga* from the *Bhagāvat-purāṇa* and after that he preached the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. The *Bhakti* movement found different expressions depending upon local situations and thought patterns of the reform activities. In this respect Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva was no exception. He was conscious of the local conflictions, and he wanted to change the culture of the society with *bhakti* as his tool. Śaṅkaradeva’s work agenda and action plan aimed at total development of the Assamese society.³¹

30. Bora, S.C. and Kalita, B. (Ed.) (2013). *Śaṅkaradeva Studies*. P. 20.

31. Pathak, D (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srīmanṭa Sankaradeva*. P. 28.

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva commenced in Assam in the later part of 15th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 16th century. It started on a missionary note by working towards the uplift of the backward classes and minimization of the rigors of caste distinctions. The earliest attempts to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaiṣṇavism was made by Śaṅkaradeva himself, who accepted Govinda belonging to the Gāro tribe; Paramānanda, belonging to the Miri (Mishing) tribe, Narahari, an Āhom man; Narottama belonging to the Nagā community; Jayarāma, a Bhutiyā person and Cāndsāi; a Muslim Person as his disciples.³² They all took part in the performance of *Bhāonā*; and when required they also acted as guides to analyse the essence of *Eka-Śarana-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. In his popular work, *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva wrote—

kṛṣṇara kathāta yito rasika /
brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāgai kika //
smaroko mātra harī dīne rāti /
*nābāchai bhakati jāti ajāti //*³³

(It means, if in Kṛṣṇa-kathā, a person has deep interest, he need not aspire to be a Brāhmaṇa by birth. Let him only recall Hari day and night; devotion makes no distinction between caste and uncaste.)

Thus, people from all castes and walks of life were received by Śaṅkaradeva as disciples; and they could even act as teachers in his Vaiṣṇava Order. A democratic outlook permeates the entire teachings and practices of the Neo-Vaiṣṇvite faith in

32. Neog, M. (1965). *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*. P. 65.

33. *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā*. Pāṣaṇḍa marddana. Pada- 129.

Assam. On the one hand, God has been brought down from the metaphysical heights to the reach of the ordinary people; on the other hand, the status of human feeling, indeed all creatures, has been elevated by insisting on the relation of God and soul. Śaṅkaradeva's concern were not limited to human rights alone, but they extended even to include animal and plant rights, as is evident from some of his literary contributions. The fundamental principle of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite philosophy was enlightenment of the human conscience through universal love. The Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, initiated by Śaṅkaradeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam even as it developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of *Bargīta* (devotional hymns heralding a new classical school of music), *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs* or *Bhāonā* as well as the *Śaṅkarī* dances as modes of conveying the principles of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, centering around single minded devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of *Nāmghar*.

Śaṅkaradeva tried to unite the whole human race within the universal brotherhood of mankind. There are various tribes and races having various cultures in the undivided Assam or the North-East India. But Śaṅkaradeva brought unity among the heterogeneous people of Assam by bringing them to the single fold of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The people of different tribal groups such as Morān, Kachārī, Chutiya, Deori etc. took *śaraṇa* under Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. This is mentioned by Śaṅkaradeva in his scripture the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as follows –

kirāta kachārī khāci gāro miri
yavan kaṅka govāla /
asama muluka dhovā ye turuka
kubācā mlecha cāṇḍāla //
āno pāpī nara kṛṣṇa sevakara
saṅgata pavitra haya //
kṛṣṇa dāsa huyā prasāda bhuñjiyā
*vaikuṇṭhe sukhe calaya //*³⁴

The *Nāmghar* became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. The establishment of the *Nāmghar* came about with the idea of popularizing the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith to the masses. For the last four hundred years, the *Nāmghar* has been serving as the village public hall : it is at once a village prayer hall, a cultural centre. Through this institution, Śaṅkaradeva made an attempt to establish law, justice and peace in the village community. This institution is found in every Assamese village. In some places, different castes combined together and constituted a *Nāmghar*.³⁵

The *Nāmghars* are managed on the basis of democratic principles. From the time of Śaṅkaradeva, the *Nāmghars* have been so designed and constructed that people of the races, living in Assam could easily enter in it and could take part in prayers. Significantly, the *Nāmghar* is built without walls or if at all, only with half walls with two rows of pillars with a thatch or tin roof. This has a great deal of symbolic value in terms of promotion of the ideal of equality. Thus Śaṅkaradeva preached equality in the spiritual domain. To him, a Vaiṣṇava, who remembers God with heart and soul is

34. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Book-II, verses. 53-54.

35. Rao, V.V (1967). *A Hundred Years of Local Self Government*. P. 26.

superior to a *Brāhmaṇa* observing religious vows.³⁶ Like the *Upaniṣad* and the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism emphasizes detachment as the key to the individual and social welfare, healthy social relationship and attainment of the final goal or *paramārtha*.

The following are the basic features of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, propagated by Śaṅkaradeva, which are found from the above discussion:

- (i) Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is monotheistic in character, i.e., the worship of One Absolute God without a second.
- (ii) Śaṅkaradeva recognised that the only One Absolute God is 'Lord Kṛṣṇa' or 'Viṣṇu'.
- (iii) In Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva held that *Jñāna* without *Bhakti* is futile.
- (iv) Śaṅkaradeva delinked *Bhakti* from any mundane objective of God.
- (v) Of the nine forms of *Bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva preferred *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* with a strong emphasis on the *dāsyā* attitude of *Bhakti*.
- (vi) Śaṅkaradeva laid great emphasis on *Bhaktas* in his Neo-Vaiṣṇavism.
- (vii) Śaṅkaradeva used the language of the masses as the medium.
- (viii) In Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva freed his order from class and caste prejudices.
- (ix) Śaṅkaradeva democratized his faith based on universal brotherhood and fraternity.

36. *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāurāṇa*; Book- X. verse- 12622.

- (x) Śaṅkaradeva employed the media of music, dance and drama, paintings etc, that is, all aspects of fine arts in addition to the vast literary works, both original and translation for popularizing his tenets.
- (xi) In the matter of organization, Śaṅkaradeva introduced and emphasised the need of some centres of religious gathering like the *Nāmghar*.

At the end, it can be said that Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is a great socio-cultural revolution to harmonize the people of Assam. It helps to spread the idea of universal brotherhood as there was no any concept of caste, class and racial distinctions. The uniqueness of the religion lies in the fact that the practice of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* brought about an ethnic integration and spiritual upliftment through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous element of the region. His religion is the most liberal, tolerant, the simplest and easiest way of attaining God and is able to maintain social order. In a word, Śaṅkaradeva can be said as a great social reformer, thinker, philosopher, who brought about an equality of existence among all sections.

4.4 : Śaṅkaradeva's Philosophical Thought :

Śaṅkaradeva has not constructed a complete system of absolute idealism because he has not been interested in philosophic enquiry. Philosophic enquiry always needs critical thinking. Instead of critical thinking, he takes interest in real concerns of human life.

Śaṅkaradeva is not a philosopher in the strict sense of the term, because he has not presented a specific philosophy of the makeup of the universe or the nature of reality. But when we take philosophy in the sense of *darśana*, which means intuitive

perception, he might very well be regarded as a philosopher. Intuitive perception means super-sensuous perception or vision. This perception is self-evident (*svatah-pramāṇita*). This is a type of holistic or integral experience. To know reality in its essence, such an experience is required.³⁷

Though no particular philosophical view or ‘ism’ has come into existence in the name of Śaṅkaradeva, it cannot be denied that philosophy is inseparably involved in the kind of distinctive outlook which has been revealed through the wide range of his writings on the concepts of God (*Īśvara*), the world (*jagat*), the living beings (*jīva*), liberation (*mukti*) the highest or ultimate goal of human life. The philosophical thought of Śaṅkaradeva is based on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*. Because the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* itself declares that it is the essence of the Vedas and the entire *Vedānta*. It is expressed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as follows –

*nigama-kalpa-tarorgalitam phalam*³⁸

Śaṅkaradeva also regarded the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* as the essence of the *Upaniṣads*. It is expressed in the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* as follows –

sarvopaniṣado gāvo dogdhā gopālanandanah /

*pārtho vatsaḥ sudhīrbhoktā dugdham gītāmṛtaṁ mahat //*³⁹

So, it can be said that Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical thought is mainly based on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*, which Śaṅkaradeva took as the essence of the *Upaniṣadic Vedānta*.

37. Baruah, Girish (2014). *Sankaradeva - A Critical Appraisal of His Philosophy And Religion*. P. - 66.

38. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Book-I, Chap.I; verses- 3.

39. *Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā* : Gītā - mātmyam verse- 6.

The philosophical thought of Śaṅkaradeva has a profound influence on the socio-cultural life of Assam, though it is living and moving thought. It is religious in its motivation, aesthetic in its application to performing art and diverse literary activities, and it is ethical in its import. His philosophy has the rare tenacity to make man dynamic and it inspires man towards all creativity. So, it can be said that Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy has a definite purpose in view and it proves itself to be relevant to changing human situations.

Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, being an integral part of Indian philosophy, endeavours to establish a deep relationship between knowing and doing. A reflective analysis of Śaṅkaradeva's work furnishes us with the fact that self-knowledge is impossible without self-discipline. His philosophy is indeed a philosophy of culture which may be brought under the caption 'Pragmatic Idealism' (*Prāyogik Bhāvanāda*), where creative humanism plays a prominent role.

Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy is practical in nature, which inspired people to have a direct, immediate and intuitive vision of the highest truth or the Supreme Reality. Realization of truth is the highest end of Indian philosophy. So, Śaṅkaradeva professed his philosophy, gave necessary instructions for the ways of its practical realization. Śaṅkaradeva was a religious thinker and preacher and also a great social reformer. He desisted from building any philosophical system; but he wrote many books of philosophical importance. In his writings, metaphysical, social and ethical concepts are distinctly found. From these concepts scattered in his noble works, a legitimate framework of his philosophy can easily be discerned.⁴⁰

40. Sarma, Nilima (Ed.) (2008). *The philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva : An Appraisal*. P. 25.

According to the spiritual philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva, the Absolute (*Brahman*), God (*Īśvara*) and the Supreme Soul (*Paramātmā*) have been looked upon as one. In other words, Śaṅkaradeva identified *Brahman* with ‘Viṣṇu’ or ‘Bhagavān’, who is the highest God of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*. ‘He’ is *Sat* (Existence), *Cit* (Knowledge or conscioumen) and *Ānanda* (Bliss) Śaṅkaradeva said this concept of identity between *Brahman* and *Bhagavān* in his *Nimi Navasiddha Saṁvāda*’ as follows –

*brahma paramātmā bhagavanta eke tattva /
ekereṣe tini nāma lakṣaṇa bhedata //*⁴¹

It means, (*Brahman*, *Paramātmā* and *Īśvara* are one and the same principle called by three different names depending on their characteristic variations).

According to Śaṅkaradeva, the Absolute Reality, that is, *Brahman* is non-dual consciousness, which have no internal and external distinction. This Absolute Reality or *Brahman* is pervading the world of multiplicity, which is created by *Māyā*. Śaṅkaradeva expressed it in his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* as follows –

*māyātesa dekhaya vividha pariccheda /
svarūpata tomāra nāhike kichu bheda //*
*caitanyaśvarūpa vyāpti eka nirañjana /
tohmāka bulibe dvaita kona ajñajana //*⁴²

It means, – The Absolute or Brahman appears as multiple forms due to *Māyā*; but essentially *Brahman* has no distinctions whatsoever. In essence, *Brahman* or *Īśvara* is conscious, all-pervading and indeterminate. Who is ignorant, only he would call that *Brahman* is dual.

41. Nimi Navasiddha Saṁvāda by Sankaradeva. P. 181.

42. *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā. Ureṣā Varṇana*. verse - 160.

Śaṅkaradeva had accepted Kṛṣṇa as his spiritual goal; for him, there is no difference between Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa. Śaṅkaradeva has referred to Nārāyaṇa as being the cause of all incarnations (*avatāra*). From this aspect, it is clear that Śaṅkaradeva's faith is strictly monotheistic. He clearly stated this in the very beginning of his '*Kīrttana-Ghoṣā*' as follows –

*prathame praṇāmo brahmarūpī sanātana
sarva avatārara kāraṇa nārāyaṇa.*⁴³

It means – (At first, I pray to Nārāyaṇa, Who is *Brahman* in revelation, eternal and the root cause of all the incarnations.)

Śaṅkaradeva says in his *Bhakti-Ratnākara* as follows –

*ekastvamātmā puruṣaḥ purāṇaḥ
satyaṁ svayaṁ jyotirānata ādyaḥ |
nityo' kṣaro' jasrasukho nirañjanaḥ
pūrṇodvayo mukta upādhio'mrtaḥ ||*⁴⁴

It means, Lord Kṛṣṇa, Who is the soul of all is one, primordial person, ever true, resplendent, endless, without a beginning, eternal, without decay, full absolute, who is free from limitation and the Bliss.

According to Śaṅkaradeva, God or Lord Kṛṣṇa is both finite, *saguṇa* (*sākāra*) and infinite, *nirguṇa* or (*nirākāra*). For the worldly persons, finite God is more approachable than the infinite one. Śaṅkaradeva projects Kṛṣṇa as the finite God who is also conceived as *nirguṇa Brahman*.

According to Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical thought, at the root of the creation of the world, God is the cause (*kāraṇa*) and the world is the effect (*kārya*). Śaṅkaradeva says this in his *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā* as follows–

43. Ibid. Caturviṁśati avatāra varṇan; verse-1.

44. Goswami, Ashok Kumar (2017). *The Bhaktiratnākāra of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva*; Chap.V; verse-6

*tumi kārya kāraṇa samasta carācara /
 suvarna kuṇḍale yena nuhike antara //
 tumi paśupakṣī surāsura taru tṛṇa /
 ajñānata muḍhane dekhe bhinna bhinna //*⁴⁵

(It means – God is the cause, and effect of all animate-inanimate; just as the gold and the earrings have the same content. God is in the beasts, birds, suras, asuras, trees and in the grass; only the fools see them as different due to ignorance.

Śaṅkaradeva also regards from the practical standpoint that, the God or Brahman is the Creator, the Sustainer, the Destroyer, the Omnipotent and the Omniscient Being. This is expressed in his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* as follows –

*sraṣṭāro sraṣṭā tumi sarvadraṣṭā
 uddhāri dharilā bhūmi /
 jīvara niyantā parama ātamā
 mṛtyuro antaka tumi //*⁴⁶

It means, God is the Creator of the creator, who is Omniscient and who rescued the earth. God is the maintainer of souls; Who is the soul supreme. This God is the destroyer of Death.

From the transcendental standpoint, Śaṅkaradeva believes in the *Brahman* devoid of all distinctions. This is expressed in the *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* as follows –

*yata dekhā carācara harimaya nirantara
 harita pṛthaka keho nohe /
 yijana bhakatihīna si dekhe harika bhinna
 harira māyāe tāka mohe //*⁴⁷

45. *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā*: Haramohan; verse-520.

46. *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā*. Syamantaka Haraṇa; verse-1437.

47. Ibid. Haramohan; verse-599.

It means, all creatures of the world are nothing else than ‘Hari’ that is, *Brahman*. There is nothing different from Hari. Only one, who is devoid of devotion, sees Hari in different form, being duped by Hari’s illusion.

In his philosophy, Śaṅkaradeva has never craved for liberation as the complete merger of the individual self in the Absolute. He says in his *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā* that–

nalāge līna mukutiko tathā /
nāhi haripada paṅkaja yathā //
karṇara amṛta hari carita /
*bhakatara mukhe śunibo nita //*⁴⁸

It means – perfect merger with God is not desirable where the Lotusfeet of Hari are not present. Accounts of Hari are nectar to the ears and individual self wants to listen to them constantly from the mouth of the devotees.

In Śaṅkaradeva’s religious philosophy the individual self is the part of the Lord Kṛṣṇa. According to him, God manifests Himself as many by his will. His manifestations as souls or matter are neither unreal nor illusion. He maintains that God is the material and efficient cause of the universe. It is expressed in Śaṅkaradeva’s book *Anādi Pātana* as follows–

sṛṣṭi sthiti laya mādhavara mokṣalīlā /
*kṛṣṇara kīṅkare pada śaṅkare racilā //*⁴⁹

It means – creation, preservation and destruction are the sport of Mādhava or Lord Kṛṣṇa and this is written in the verse by Śaṅkaradeva, the servant of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

In the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva, the individual *self* or *jīva*, who is the part of Lord is taken as God’s servant (*dāsa*). The individual *self* or *jīva* is the part of God.

48. Ibid. Pāsaṇḍa Marddana; verse-113.

49. *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. III. – P. 106.

Śaṅkaradeva recognised the difference between God and the individual self or living being. He says this in his *Bhakti-Ratnākara* that—

*sa īśo yadvaśe māyā sa jīvo yastayārditaḥ /
svāvirbhutaparānandaḥ svāvirbhūtasu duḥkhadaḥ //*⁵⁰

It means, – Lord (*Īśvara*) is that, under Whom there is *Māyā* (illusion) and the individual self (*Jīva*) is that, who oppressed by *Māyā*, *Īśvara* (the Supreme self) is full of supreme bliss and *Jīva* (individual self) is destined to misery.

In Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, it is also seen that he neither admitted anything other than *māyā śakti*; that is, Śaṅkaradeva never accepted anything like *svarūpa śakti* or *jīva śakti* nor he recognised any female power of God like Rādhā or Lakṣmī. As Śaṅkaradeva did not recognise *svarūpa śakti*, so the character of Rādhā or the Rādhā principle found no favour with his view. In spite of his acceptance of the fact of One Kṛṣṇa becoming many on the occasion of *rāsālīlā*, he does not admit of Kṛṣṇa turning Himself into Rādhā in order to enjoy the delight of divine play. However, it may be mentioned that some have looked for the influence of the post-Caitanya Vaiṣṇava philosophy of Bengal in the spiritual philosophy propagated by Śaṅkaradeva making a reference to the character of Rādhā, which is the name of a gopī in his play *Keligopāla*. But it is to be noted that the character of Rādhā in the play *Keligopāla* is nothing more than that of a merely egoistic Gopī.

According to Śaṅkaradeva, there is no distinction in God such as internal or external. So, the creation of the world of beings belongs to the fundamental power of God. For not having recognised any other power of Kṛṣṇa except His *māyā śakti*,

50. *The Bhaktiratnākara*; chap.-22; verse-1

Śaṅkaradeva has looked upon the creation of the world and the divine play of Kṛṣṇa as the same manifestation of God. In other words, Śaṅkaradeva regards *māyā* as a power of *Īśvara*, which belongs to and is controlled by Him. *Māyā* or *Mahāmāyā*, as He sometimes says, is not different from Him and is described as His *ardhakāya*, i.e., one half of His body. *Māyā* becomes manifested by the will of God for the purpose of the creation of the world. He described it in his book *The Anādi-Pātana* as follows –

anādirūpiṇī īśvarara arddha kāya /
vyakta bhailā mahāmāyā sṛṣṭika icchāya //
... tohmāre āhmare kiñciteko nāhi bhina /
mora nija śakti sākṣāte dekho prāṇa /
*satvare kariyo māyā jagata nirmāṇa //*⁵¹

In Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical thought, this *māyā* has two powers; viz: the power of concealment and the power of projection. *Māyā* causes illusion to all because of which the Lord appears as many. So, it seems that Śaṅkaradeva does not make any difference between *Prakṛti* and *māyā*. But sometimes he has made a difference between *māyā* and *avidyā*.

According to Śaṅkaradeva, this world is *Brahmamaya* in his philosophical view. He says that in this world, only Śrī Kṛṣṇa exists as both the cause and the effect. Thus, it can be said that the world is not different from *Brahman*. But Śaṅkaradeva again says that this is not absolutely real. In his philosophical view, the world is the manifestation of the Supreme Reality just like the rope-snake illusion. Śaṅkaradeva

51. *The Anādi Pātana*. verses-45-49

points out that though the world is not real, it appears as real being the production of *sat Brahman*. Śaṅkaradeva describes it in the *Vedastuti* of *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā* as follows—

asanta jagatkhāna tohmāta udbhava bhailā
*santa hena prakāśai sadāya//*⁵²

It means – The unreal world sprang from *Brahman*, which appears as real ever.

In his philosophy, Śaṅkaradeva never made any difference between the physical and mental aspect of the world. He has used the terms *saṁsāra* and ‘the world’ synonymously. In his view, the *saṁsāra* and the world is nothing but the imagination of the mind. Hence, in ultimate analysis, this world is not real, as such it is destructible. He describes it in his *Anādi-Pātana* as follows –

manara kalpanā iṭo samste saṁsāra /
jāgana svapana nidrā tini vṛtti sāra//
*āche mana samaste prāṇīra hṛdayata//*⁵³

It means, This whole world is a projection of the mind. The world has essentially three stages : waking, dream and sleep. The mind is there in the hearts of all beings.

According to Śaṅkaradeva, the individual selves or the *jīvas* are the parts of *Brahman*. The individual selves belong to the body of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. In his book *The Anādi-Pātana*, he shows that the *jīvas* are like the reflection of God in the mind and the *jīvas* and the mind is non-different from it. It is expressed as follows—

īśvarara pratibimba lāgiche manata /
*tāke buli jīva mana ere bhinna nui //*⁵⁴

52. *The Kīrttana-Ghoṣā*; *Vedastuti*; verse-1669.

53. *The Anādi-Pātana*. verse –66.

54. *Ibid.* verses- 66-67.

It means – That is called the individual self and the mind is non-different from *Brahman*.

But Śaṅkaradeva admits no difference between the *jīva* and Brahman. Śaṅkaradeva quotes verses in his *Bhakti Ratnākara* to show the difference between the *jīva* and *Īśvara*. According to him, *Parameśvara* is the controller to *māyā*, while the *jīvas* are controlled by *māyā*. *Īśvara* is the Supreme bliss while the *jīvas* experience happiness, sorrows etc. *Īśvara* is connected with knowledge and is ‘*saccidānandarūpa*’, but the *jīvas* are enveloped by ignorance or *avidyā*. *Īśvara* is eternally free; but on the other hand, *jīvas* attain liberation by worshipping Him. *Īśvara* is pure, conscious and immutable, while the *jīvas* are ignorant, inert and mutable. *Parameśvara* is the first person (*ādīpuruṣa*) and He is *anādi* (beginningless); but the *jīvas* have beginning. In this way, Śaṅkaradeva has shown the difference between the *jīvas* and *Parameśvara* in his *Bhaktiratnākara*.⁵⁵

But actually, this difference between the *jīvas* and *Parameśvara* is not ultimate according to Śaṅkaradeva; because he says though the *jīvas* are not really different from Him, they are dependent on Him. According to Śaṅkaradeva’s view, this difference is caused by *māyā* or *avidyā* only.

In Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophy, it is found that *bhakti* is the best path for the attainment of liberation. According to him, by dedicating oneself to the Lotus-feet of Śrī Kṛṣṇa alone, one can attain liberation. Regarding *bhakti* in Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical thought, it will be discussed briefly in the later chapters.

55. *The Bhaktiratnākara*; Chap. 22. verses – 1-10.

‘Incarnation of God’ is another feature of Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophy. The main objective of the incarnation of God is to restore truth and peace and to establish the sublimity of God. Kṛṣṇa is the *pūrṇa avatāra* (Perfect incarnation) of *Brahman*. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* declares that ‘Kṛṣṇa’ is the *Bhagavāna* Himself (*Kṛṣṇastu Bhagavān Svayaṁ*)⁵⁶ despite his being in form.

In the writings of Śaṅkaradeva, the following points are found, which have philosophical bearing –

- (i) The supreme truth is *Brahman*.
- (ii) God or *Īśvara* and *Brahman* are the same reality.
- (iii) This *Brahman* or God is there in every being.
- (iv) God or *Īśvara* and His creations are not different.
- (v) *Jīvātmā* or the self is a component of God, which constitute the body of God.
- (vi) The creation of God or the Universe is temporary, which is appeared to be real.
- (vii) *Māyā* is an attribute of God and its influence can be avoided by the grace of God.⁵⁷

In Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical thought, it is found that *Brahman* is the ultimate reality. The whole universe is unreal; under the spell of *māyā*, the *jīva* believes in the illusion of this world of multiplicity and takes the illusory world to be real. According to Śaṅkaradeva, *māyā* is the magical power of *Brahman* through

56. *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; Book-I, Chap.3; verses- 28.

57. Borkakti, Sanjib Kr. (2012). *Unique Contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture*; P. 117

which the world is projected. The self and the universe are not different from *Brahman* or God; but due to the influence of *māyā*, the self or *jīva* forgets its real nature and suffers from all kinds of sufferings in this world.

An attempt has been made here to express the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva from the large corpus of his writings. He tried to lay down a simple and practical path to salvation for the teeming millions. Śaṅkaradeva was not eager to establish himself as a founder of a new philosophical school and therefore did not arrange his thoughts systematically. But in his writings, it is seen that there is indeed an original line of philosophical thinking. The base of his philosophical thoughts is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and its commentary, the *Bhāgavata-Bhāvāratha-Dīpikā* by Śrīdhara Svāmīn. He brought *vedānta* philosophy from the ivory tower of theoretical speculations down to the common people and made it their common possession.

Śaṅkaradeva casts his vision of *Brahman* through Lord Kṛṣṇa. Being a social reformer, his interest was to bind the people in the name of God - “Lord Kṛṣṇa”, so that the people of different beliefs can easily be motivated. He asserted that God is one, unique and peerless. It embraces all where all divisions and distinctions become a matter of non-entity.

Śaṅkaradeva engages himself in a religious or theological interpretation of reality. He is against traditional theism. Though he admits the transcendency of God, he has found God within the world in the being of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the being-in-itself, being as such, being of beings. It bears the elements like *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda* or *satyam*, *śivam*, *sundaram*.

For religious pursuit, Śaṅkaradeva gave an *Īśvara* with attributes. But in the intellectual sphere, he raised the status of this determined God to that of the attributeless *Brahman*. This is his unique contribution, for it does not fit into Śaṅkara's *Advaita* or Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita*. For him, determinate God and indeterminate *Brahman* are essentially the same entity.

The basic religion behind the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva is Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, propagated by him. From the above discussion, it is evident that Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva was not only for propagation of religion, it also reformed the Assamese society. It gave a most liberal faith, that is, *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, which minimised caste distinction, removed superstitions and irrational activities done in the name of religion.