

## CHAPTER-IV

# ŚAṄKARADEVA'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION

Vaiṣṇavism was in its height in the Northern India during the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. Vaiṣṇavite saints like Kabīra, Nānaka, Meerabai and Surdas popularised Vaiṣṇavism and its ideology in different parts of the country. All of them were the propagators of Vaiṣṇava religion that propagated *Kṛiṣṇa bhakti* in the respective parts of Indian sub-continent. In Assam, Vaiṣṇavism was propounded and propagated by Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva was born in 1449 AD at Bordowā of Nagaon district of Assam. During this period, the people of Assam followed different religious beliefs and practices which can be categorised under *Śaivism*, *Śaktism*, Buddhism, and traditional *Vaiṣṇavism*. This happened due to the Indo-mongoloid cosmopolitan and liberal culture of people who did not follow the caste and creed prejudice. No particular religion was followed by them. They were followers of Henotheism i.e. believer of all gods. During the time of Śaṅkaradeva, Henotheism was practiced by the people of Assam. In Śaṅkaradeva's time, Henotheism was nurtured and grown among these people. Śaṅkaradeva's forefathers were also followers of *Śaivism* and *Śaktism*.

Śaṅkaradeva spent his childhood under the guidance of his grandmother Khersūtī and his mentor Mahendra Kandali, who was a renowned scholar. The primary academic foundation of Śaṅkaradeva was formulated by the teachings of Mahendra Kandali. He studied *Vedas*, *Purāṇas*, and other religious books under his

guidance. Later on, Śaṅkaradeva traveled to northern India and became an aspirant of Vaiṣṇava religion that insists on being the believer of only one God -Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. 'Śaṅkaradeva, unlike other contemporary Vaiṣṇavite saints across the country, had the observation that man's religious life existed in total isolation.'<sup>1</sup> Śaṅkaradeva was not a supporter of the sacrifice culture to propitiate God. In contrast to the ritualistic, formal religious practices, Śaṅkaradeva insisted more on simplistic religious activities like chanting of and listening to the name, works and qualities of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* (*Kīrtana* and *Śravaṇa*). It was a refined approach in the Vaiṣṇavite practices and became known as the Neo-vaiṣṇavite movement. As a social reformer, 'Śaṅkaradeva was not just the propagator of an Assamese version of Neo-vaiṣṇavism but a splended genius, whose action and ideals enlivened the people for a new social restructuring in his own time and thereafter, renewed the spirit of the Assamese people.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the Neo-vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, in the last part of the fifteenth century, was a unique development in the socio-cultural history of Assam. Though the ideology was developed for religious purpose, it was not limited to religious rituals alone but equal importance on cultural, philosophical development of the erstwhile Assamese mass also. This movement brought in its wake a literary and artistic contribution with the seeds of social reconstruction and renaissance in Assam. 'This movement did not differ in essential points from similar Vaiṣṇava movements of medieval India. The characteristics like belief in and

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<sup>1</sup> Pathak, Dayananda. (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 28

<sup>2</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p.114.

adoration of a personal God *Viṣṇu* or *Kṛṣṇa*, emphasized on devotion and faith, recognition of the equality of all persons, ignoring of the caste distinction at the spiritual level, the high place assigned to virtues like love, piety and non-violence, and deprecation of the practice of the image of worship, etc. is common to all Vaiṣṇavite sects of India. This movement, therefore, is included as a part of the all-India Vaiṣṇavite movement of the middle ages.’<sup>3</sup>

Hence, Śaṅkaradeva believed in the holistic development of man and society. Religion should not be an isolated set of devotional practices. Rather it should be a medium of the cultural, economic and social development. He wanted a balanced growth of man. ‘Śaṅkaradeva accommodated man’s social and economic life through *bhakti* culture. In this process, Śaṅkaradeva had to make necessary adjustments in the erstwhile social set up as the contemporary Assamese society was strife-torn, politically divided, socially disturbed and morally degenerated. Internecine feuds and rivalries created a situation that precluded the emergence of a healthy and solid society.’<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the religious practices performed by the Hindus were very expensive. ‘Animal sacrifices had a damaging impact on agricultural practice. Pilgrimages were also a costly and hazardous affair. To relieve people of such an encumbrance, Śaṅkaradeva made religious rituals simple.’<sup>5</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva’s ideology was based on liberalism, spiritualism, and tolerant spirit. Śaṅkaradeva kept no distinction in caste and creed, between the rich and the poor and the high and the low. He hoped to create an egalitarian society where people

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<sup>3</sup> Sharma, Satyandranath. (1966). *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Introductory part.

<sup>4</sup> Pathak, Dayananda. (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. P.147.

can enjoy equal material and spiritual growth irrespective of their caste and economic status. The teachings of Śaṅkaradeva have been full of such democratic morals and ideals. As a renowned scholar, Śaṅkaradeva had a vision of society that all men would be equal. 'Śaṅkaradeva was not primarily a speculative thinker. His ideal was not to propound a religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system based on devotion and faith. Moreover, he could clearly and rightly perceive that society was more in need of reformation than a system of philosophy. That is why he diverted his attention solely towards the propagation of the new faith without caring whether the religion propagated by him was based on a systematic philosophy or not.'<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.1:-Śaṅkaradeva- A Brief Biographical Sketch:**

Śaṅkaradeva was born at the Bordowā of Nagaon district of Assam in 1449 AD. The name of his father was Kusumbara and his mother's name was Satyasandhyā. Śaṅkaradeva lost his father when he was only seven years old. His mother too died at his early years. Orphaned Śaṅkaradeva was brought up by his grandmother Khersūtī and his grand-uncle Jayanta Doloi. But, when the grand Uncle Jayanta Doloi took up the responsibility of the administrative duties of the *Bhūñā* Kingdom as *Śiromoṇi Bhūñāship*, it was the grandmother Khersūtī who became the sole guardian of Śaṅkaradeva.

##### **4.1.1: Education:**

The formal educational life of Śaṅkaradeva was started bit a late .Till twelve years of his life; he did not attend the formal educational institutions. In his twelfth

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<sup>6</sup> Sharma, Satyandranath.(1966).*The Neo -Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam.* p.25

year, the grandmother Khersūtī took him to the residential school of Mahendra Kandali, a renowned teacher (Guru) and scholar of those times. Mahendra Kandali started giving lessons to Śaṅkaradeva on a ‘Thursday of Assamese *Bhāda* month of 1383 Śakābda (1461 AD)’.<sup>7</sup> The institution was known as *ṭol-* a traditional educational institution where the students learn things directly from the teacher. Since the beginning; Śaṅkaradeva was a serious student with extraordinary talent and skill. He could easily understand any topic. Within a short period, he mastered over the Sanskrit language and studied four *Vedas*, eighteen *Purāṇas*, eighteen *Kāvya*s, fourteen *Vyākaraṇas*, and two Epics in details. As a teacher, Mahendra Kandali was amazed at his extraordinary talent and said-

“*jikhāni jānu pahālu ekā; nāiu aāro, āne sātabarshyā pahiyu napāre ekā.moi kāraṇe he, āpuni nirmilā śāstrā, tāko pahā huwā chatra*”.<sup>8</sup>

During his schooling, one day Mahendra Kandali took an aptitude test of the entire students. Śaṅkaradeva composed a verse that had no vowels except ‘a’. This poem was-

*karatala kamala kamaladala nayana/*

*bhava dava dahana gahana vana śayana//*

*napara napara para satarata gamaya/*

*sabhayam abhaya bhaya mama hara satataya//*

*kharataravara śara hata daśa vadana/*

*khagacara nagadhara phanadhara śayana/*

<sup>7</sup> Borkakati, Sanjib Kumar(2007). *Place of Srimanta Sankaradeva in All India Perspective*. p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Lakharu, Upendra Ch.(2011-6th edition). *Kathā-Guru Carit*, p. 22

*jagadagha mapaphara bhava bhaya taraṇa/*

*parapada laya kara kamalaja bayana//*

This was an extraordinary poetic piece without any Assamese vowel .His depiction of the features and virtues of Lord *Viṣnu* within such a short space was undoubtedly an extraordinary talent. His teacher was highly impressed by the genuine talent of his student and said-

*taila loṇa nāi khudā bāñjanarā ane sād, binā jāru bandhān, ārā khudā sakti manuṣya nuhi, kibā harire chadme āsehi.*<sup>9</sup>

Around his time of schooling at Mahendra Kandali's ṭol (School), Śaṅkaradeva composed his first full length book *Hariścandra Upākhyāna*. It was a verse book based on a story from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. The story deals with the devotion of Hariścandra towards Lord *Viṣnu*. Here he highlights the outcome of pure devotion and supremacy of *Viṣnu*. This book still holds significance for all the followers of *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* because, in this book, Śaṅkaradeva for the first time gave his own perspective on the philosophy of *bhakti*. The book is also famous for its poetic skill.

Śaṅkaradeva came back home in 1465 AD. and he insisted on the maintenance of his physical health and started '*Āsana, Prāṇāyama, and Haṭha-yoga* for his health'<sup>10</sup>. These practices strengthened the enviable physique of Śaṅkaradeva until the end of his life.

<sup>9</sup> Lakharu, Upendra Ch, *op.cit*, p. 21

<sup>10</sup> Lakharu, Upendra Ch.(Ed.). *op.cit*,p.22

#### 4.1.2: Administrative Responsibility:

Śaṅkaradeva belonged to the clan of *Bhūñās*. The *Bhūñās* were considered as the landlords in Assam. They had the sovereign ruling authority over some specific areas of the state. Originally, Śaṅkaradeva was a *Bāra-Bhūñā*. The *Bāra-Bhūñās* enjoyed the status of a king or a ruler within their local areas. They had enough properties both movable and immovable. They were mere vassal lords of the ruling powers. After leaving school, Śaṅkaradeva took over the charge of *Śīromaṇi Bhūñāship* from the grand uncle Jayanta and started looking after his family and the territory. Thus Śaṅkaradeva emerged as a young administrator who joined the traditional family activities. During that time, he was known as *Dekāgiri* (Young master). As an administrator, Śaṅkaradeva was responsible for protecting his subjects and to look after the well-being of the people.

#### 4.1.3: Family life:

At the age of twenty-one, Śaṅkaradeva married Sūryavatī in 1471 AD; the daughter of Hari Khā Bhūñā. She was then only fourteen years old. In 1472 Śaṅkaradeva became the father of a girl child. The name of the baby was Manu. Unfortunately, Śaṅkaradeva's wife Sūryavatī died nine months later after the birth of their child. At the age of fifty-four, Śaṅkaradeva married for the second time. The name of his second wife was Kāṁdī. They got married in 1503AD. She was the daughter of Ram and Jayanti Bhūñā. She was only fifteen years old. In their life, they had three sons- Ramānanda, Kamalalocana, and Haricharana. Ramānanda had a son and his name was Puruṣottama, while Haricharana too had a son Chaturbhujā. Kamalalocana had no children.

#### 4.1.4: The Pilgrimage of Śaṅkaradeva:

In 1481 AD, at the age of thirty-five, Śaṅkaradeva handed over his administrative responsibility to his grand-uncle Jayanta and set out for his pilgrimage. He started realising the fact that administration was not his cup of tea; he had something wider and spiritual to explore. The decision of pilgrimage stands for the fact that Śaṅkaradeva had a different mission in his life. He wanted to directly experience the stock of knowledge and to contribute something for the betterment of the contemporary society. He had already surrendered to devotion and spirituality. But at the same time he knew that to execute his vision, practical knowledge of the wider world was very much necessary. The pilgrimage of Śaṅkaradeva was his step to gain the experiences of wider spectrum of spirituality. It shows how modern and progressive he was. One by one Śaṅkaradeva and his disciples visited all the holy shrines of the Indian sub-continent. Thus, he visited Purī in the east and Dwārakā in the west, just as he travelled Badarikāshrama in the north and, Rāmesharama in the south. During the visit, Śaṅkaradeva experienced the impact of the *bhakti* movement throughout northern India as well as eastern India. In 1492, he returned home. The pilgrimage had already turned Śaṅkaradeva into an experienced and insightful soul. He could feel how Vaiṣṇavism changed the socio-cultural setting of the places. He realized that religion has a more democratic, more egalitarian wing and the ability to transform a society. Śaṅkaradeva set out for his second pilgrimage in 1550 AD. Altogether, one hundred twenty devotees were included in his team. The pilgrims set out from Pātbāusī on the seventh day of Assamese *Āghon* month in 1472 Śakābda (1550 AD). After a long journey, the pilgrims arrived at Pātbāusī in April, 1551 AD.

#### 4.1.5: Conversation with Mādhavadeva:

Mādhavadeva was the chief disciple of Śaṅkaradeva. The name of his father was Govindagirī. He was an accountant of Pratap Rai, the king of Baṅḍukā. At present, it is known as the Rangpur district of Bangladesh. Govindagirī had migrated from Kanauja. He married a girl name Anuchitā, but she died at an early age leaving an infant son. His name was Damodar. Later, Govindagirī settled in upper Assam with some merchandise. When he reached Tembuṅānī of the present Nagaon district of Assam, he married a girl named Monoramā. Mādhavadeva was born on 1<sup>st</sup> *Jeth* (Assamese month) 1411 Śakābda (1489 AD). He completed his education under Rājendra Adhyāpaka; a reputed scholar of Baṅḍukā. Within a short time, Mādhavadeva mastered over all the scriptures. At Baṅḍukā, Mādhavadeva met his elder brother for the first time, when his mother was critically ill. As animal sacrifice was considered to be a major means of curing a disease, Mādhavadeva mentally decided to offer as an oblation a pair of he-goats to the goddess *Durgā*. So, he gave some money to his brother-in-law Rāmadāsa to procure the goats. But Rāmadāsa did not procure the goats. An angry Mādhavadeva rebuked the -

*nāmat hunkāra bhuddhita pāgal*

*bihāne takā dilo nānili shāgal*<sup>11</sup>

Through these lines Mādhavadeva criticised Rāmdās for not bringing the goat. He said that though he was an expert in chanting the name of God, he was an idiot as he did not purchase a goat for which he was paid in the morning.

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<sup>11</sup> Lakharu, Upendra Ch, *op.cit*, p. 51

Then, Rāmadāsa replied that one should never sacrifice any animal, as the animal is also a creation of God and it should never be killed in the name of religion. Mādhavadeva, till that time, was not familiar with the ideology of Neo-vaiṣṇavism..So he did not accept the argument of Rāmadāsa and sought to challenge even Śaṅkaradeva and said-

*mūrkhara āgata yena kathā kaha tay  
dharma cinibāka kichu nājānoho may<sup>12</sup>*

It means you speak before me as if I am an idiot, that I do not know what religion is ?

The next day both set out to Belaguri to meet Śaṅkaradeva. After the initial introduction with Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva started questioning Śaṅkaradeva about the importance and significance of *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*. Responding to Madhavdeva, Śaṅkaradeva clarified the basic features of his religion and made him realise that the devotion to the supreme God meant devotion to all deities just as the water sucked in by the roots of a tree goes to nourish all its branches and leaves. This argument of Śaṅkaradeva came from a *Slokā* of *Bhāgavata Purāna* as follows-

*yathā taromūlaniṣecanena tṛpyanti tatskandhabhujopaśākhāḥ/  
prāṇopahārācca yathendriyāṇām̐ tathaiva sarvārhaṇamacyutejyā// (4/31/14)*

However, ‘this conversation of Śaṅkaradeva with Mādhavdeva is still significant, because, later, Mādhavdeva became a chief disciple of Śaṅkaradeva and propagated his philosophical idea with renewed vigour.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.51

<sup>13</sup> Sharma, Nilima.(Ed).(2008).*The Philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva-An Appraisal*. p. 13

## 4.2: Unique Works and Activities:

### 4.2.1: Pioneer of Women Upliftment:

According to *Kathā Guru Carit* (KGC) and *Guru Carita Katha* (GCK), the flood was one of the most devastating and recurrent natural calamities of ancient Assam. It was an annual calamity that led to the heavy material loss of the people. At Bordowā, the Bhūñās approached Śaṅkaradeva to initiate resolution for this serious problem. Tembuvānī was heavily damaged by the flood. People lost their houses, livestock, material properties. So the people of the locality approached their administrator for a permanent resolution of the issue. The Bhūñās planned to construct a dam so that the flood can be stopped during the rainy season. Śaṅkaradeva guided these people to construct the dam and succeeded. A fisherwoman named Yogamāyā from the marginalised community, later became famous as Rādhikā Śatī, and was wholeheartedly involved with the construction of his dam. Śaṅkaradeva encouraged the woman to participate in the construction work, though public participation of women was a rare case at that time. Under the direction of Śaṅkaradeva, Yogamāyā became the first woman who came out of the restrictions on women and emerged as equal to man. She was the first women worker to carry out the instruction of Śaṅkaradeva and was involved in the construction of the dam. The progressive outlook and desire for empowerment of women on the part of Śaṅkaradeva is clearly visible from this initiative. 'Śaṅkaradeva proved that he gave equal status to all castes by this single action. A fisherwoman, considered to be of the lowest caste in the traditional society in those days was given the opportunity of leading the public was a revolutionary step.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Borkakati, Sanjib Kumar(2007).*Place of Srimanta Sankaradeva in All India Perspective*. p. 18

#### 4.2.2: *Cihnayātrā*: The first regional Assamese Drama:

Śaṅkaradeva initiated the staging of *Cihnayātrā* – the first drama in the history of Assamese performing arts. He could understand the fact that direct preaching of religious philosophy would not attract the people. So, he crafted the idea of propounding religious lessons through artistic, popular, cultural means. The *Cihnayātrā* was the first step of Śaṅkaradeva to attract people towards his ideal of Neo-vaiṣṇavite movement. It was a dance musical performance depicted on the glory of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. In this performance, he drew the paintings of seven heavens (*Sapta Vaikuṅṭhas*) and got prepared the musical instruments under his guidance by local artisans. He also played a significant part as an instrumentalist. Śaṅkaradeva solely played the role of the producer, director, musician and actor of the whole drama which led him to great success, and ultimately he succeeded to spread his religion *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*. Significantly, ‘this dramatical activity of Śaṅkaradeva can be compared only to that of William Shakespeare, who came 119 years later to the realm of theatre and it, became the first stage show of Assamese and world history.’<sup>15</sup>

The major significance of this creative activity of Śaṅkaradeva was-

- It was a historical phenomenon in Assam as for the first time the people of Assam witnessed such a full-fledged cultural production with a religious message.
- Śaṅkaradeva solely played different roles-producer, dramatist, art director, music composer, actor etc. It stands for his multitalented skills and his mastery over art and culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Borkakati, Sanjib Kumar.*op.cit*, p. 17.

- Preaching the spiritual lessons through popular and entertaining way was a very innovative idea and he was fully successful in this attempt.
- Śaṅkaradeva designed the local musical instruments all by himself. Moreover he also acquired the skills of playing those instruments. Śaṅkaradeva was a master drummer (*Khol*) and was capable of playing nine drums (*Khol*) at a time. In Assamese musical history for the first time, the use of the musical instrument drum (*Khol*) was conceived by Śaṅkaradeva.
- After witnessing the performance, his mentor Mahendra Kandali accepted him as Guru .It also shows that Śaṅkaradeva was an exceptionally brilliant man who ran ahead of time.
- Śaṅkaradeva composed a small booklet known as *Gopī-uddhava-saṁvāda* which is based on the tenth canto of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*.

#### 4.2.3: Establishment of Spiritual and Worship Place: The *Thān* (Nāmghar):

Śaṅkaradeva at Tembuvānī began delivering religious discourse to the people. He also got an institutional structure at Tembuvānī, which came to be known as *Thān* over time. It had a prayer house called *Kīrttanghar* and surrounded by huts – residential arrangements for the devotees. .‘This institution came up in 1468AD’<sup>16</sup>. It was a kind of public space which later became popular as *Nāmghar* or *Kīrttanghar* to practice and preach his faith in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Śāstras*. *Nāmghar* can be literally defined as the space where devotees take the *Nāma*– chanting of the life and activities of the Almighty. Along with *Nāmghar* or *Kīrttanghar*, he built *Maṇikūṭa*– an internal space to keep the Holy Scriptures and the *Chāri-hāti* for the accommodation

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<sup>16</sup> Borkakati, Sanjib Kumar.*op.cit*,p.15

of his disciples at the *Thān. Śimhāsana* or *Thāpanā* (altar of God) was also placed in the *Maṇikūṭa* with *Bhagavata Śāstra* for worship.

In *Kīrttanghar*, Śaṅkaradeva started the practices of *Nāma-prasāga*. It stands for the practice of chanting the life story and activities of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. This practice engages the devotees and a lead singer who reads out certain section of verses from a holy text in a certain mutual manner. *Nāmghars* also turned out to be a popular public space for collective activities like religious functions, cultural performances, musical lessons etc. Thus, the *Thān* or *Nāmghar* was the innovative institutional works of Śaṅkaradeva and the center of his core ethical values and spiritual realization. Therefore, it was regarded as the *Dvītiya Vaikuṅṭha* (Second heaven) and even greater than *Dvārakā* or *Vaikuṅṭha* itself.

#### **4.2.4: Pioneer of Indigenous Craft and Cottage Industry: The *Vṛndābanī Vastra***

Preparation of the *Vṛndābanī Vastra* was one of the historical initiatives of Śaṅkaradeva. It was initiated at *Paṭbāusī* (present Barpeta district of Assam) under the regime of Koch Kingdom. The Yuvarāja Śukladhvaja or Chilārāi, the younger brother of King (Mahārāja) Naranārāyaṇa requested him for weaving the complete details of *Vṛndāvana* – the holy place of the Hindus where Lord *Kṛṣṇa* is imagined to be born and brought up. Preparing such an artifact of delicate details was undoubtedly a herculean task in such a time as it needed peculiar type of rare raw materials. But Śaṅkaradeva agreed and took up the initiative. In the present Barpetā area of Assam, there was a village named *Tāntikuchī*, where an expert weaver community resided. Śaṅkaradeva himself learnt the art of weaving and embroidering from them. Śaṅkaradeva started this project of weaving and also engaged the weavers of

*Tāntīkuchī* of Barpetā. The weaving leaders were Gopāl and later his disciple Mathurādās Buhā Ātā played the role of the leader of the group and became the master weaver. Within six months, the artifact was prepared and they became successful in depicting *Kṛṣṇa Līlā* (play) scene in the product. This woven product with the scenes of *Vṛndāvana* gradually became popular as *Vṛndāvanī Vastra*. This was beautifully illustrated by his designing and on the job supervision of the weaving works of local people. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva was known as the pioneer of the cottage and craft industry of Assam through this magnificent work.

#### **4.2.5: As a Playwright of Regional Language:**

Śaṅkaradeva was a pioneer of the entire resurgence movement of the Indian regional language. He was the first playwright in all the modern Indian languages. His first play *Cihṇayātrā* was written and enacted in 1468AD at Tembuvānī (Bordowā). Before Śaṅkaradeva, the plays or dramatic pieces in India were written in Sanskrit language only, which was difficult to be comprehended for common masses. Śaṅkaradeva initiated a new tradition of regional dramaturgy and wrote various plays in the regional language, which was popularly known as *Vrajāvalī* or *Vrajabulī*, an offshoot of the Maithili language. This literary form of the *Maithilī Prākṛta* was used particularly in religious literature in Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and part of Uttar Pradesh. Śaṅkaradeva used this language in his writings for two specific purposes – to make the dramas easily comprehensible for the common mass and to disseminate his religio-philosophical teachings in a more acceptable manner. It was a very progressive step as up to that time literature was dominated by the Sanskrit Language and by those who knew this language. The plays written by Śaṅkaradeva are , *Patnī-prasāda*, *Kāli*

(*ya*)-*damana*, *Keli-gopāla*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, and *Śrī Rāma-vijaya*. The last play of Śaṅkaradeva is *Śrī Rāma-vijaya*, which was written in 1568 AD, before his death. These plays came to be known as *Ankīyā Nāṭ*. The enactment of the *Ankīyā* plays is called *Bhāonā* (Drama). With the passage of time, *Bhāonā* turned out to be the symbol of Cultural identity of the native Assamese people who follow Vaiṣṇavism. But significantly, *Bhāonā* till now, is known more as a cultural and artistic activity than as a religious channel. Śaṅkaradeva's main purpose of this *Bhāonā* was to draw the attention of the people to the importance of devotion to Lord *Kṛṣṇa*.

#### 4.3: Literary Works:

The literary works of Śaṅkaradeva can chronologically be arranged in the following way:

##### A-Early Period :in the Bāra Bhūñā territories

- (i) Non-Bhāgavata group-
  1. *Hariścandra-upākhyāna* (*Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa*)
  2. *Bhakti- pradīpa* (*Garuḍa-purāṇa*)
  3. *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*: Ureṣā-varnaṇa section (*Brahma-purāṇa*)
- (ii) Non-Bhāgavata material mixed with *Bhāgavata* elements, not influenced by Śrīdhara Svāmī-
  4. *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa-kāvya* (*Harivaṁśa* and *Bhāgavata purāṇa*)
- (iii) lyrics
  5. ***Bargītas***
- (iv) First group of *Bhāgavata* tales taken from outside Book X-

6. *Ajāmilopākhyāna* (Book VI )
7. *Amṛta-mathana* (Book VIII )
8. *Kīrtana- ghoṣā: Ajāmilopākhyāna* (Book VI), *Prahlāda caritra* (book III, VII), *Haramohana, Bali-chalana, Gajendra upākhyāna'*(Book VIII) and *Dhyānavarṇana* sections.

(v) *Guṇamālā*, ii-vi.

### **B.Middle Period: in the Āhom kingdom (c.1516-c.1543)**

(i) Arguments to confront with the enemy of the *bhakti* cult-

(3) *Kīrtana- ghoṣā :Pāṣaṇḍa-marddana and Nāmāparādha sections (Bhāgavata- Padma- and Br̥han-nāradīya-purāṇa. Viṣṇudharmottara and Sūta-saṁhitā)*

9. (Vipra-) *patnī-prasāda-nāṭa (Bhāgavata- purāṇa, X).*

(ii) tales of Kṛṣṇa's early life from the Pūrvārdha of the *Bhāgavata- purāṇa-X-*

(3) *Kīrtana- ghoṣā : Śiśu-lilā, Rāsa-krīdā, Kāmsavadha, Gopī-uddava-saṁvadā, Kūjīr vāñchā-puraṇa and Akrūrar vāñchā-puraṇa* sections.

### **C. Final Period: in the Koch kingdom (c.1543-1568)**

(i) the second group of *Bhāgavata* tales, taken from outside Book X

10. *Bali-Chalana* ( Book VIII)

11. *Anādi-pātana* (Book III, *Vamāna- purāṇa*)

(ii) *Bhāgavata* tales from Books X (Uttarārdha) ,XI and XII

(3) *Kīrtana- ghoṣā : Jarāsandha-yuddha, Kālavavana-vadha, Mucukunda-stuti, Syamanta-haraṇa, Nāradar Kṛṣṇa-darśana, Vipra-putra-ānayana, Daivakīr-putra-ānavana, Vedastuti, Līlamālā, Rukminīr prema-kalaha, Bhrgu-parīṣā, Śrīkṛṣṇar vaikṇṭha-prayāṇa, Catutviṁśati-avatāra-varṇana and Tātparya* sections.

(iii) renderings of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* classified *Skandha* by *Skandha* or in the form of independent anecdotes

12. *Bhāgavata*, X.Ādi

13. *Bhāgavata*, XI (with materials from Books I and III)

14. *Bhāgavata*, XII

15. *Bhāgavata*, I

16. *Bhāgavata*, II

17. *Bhāgavata*, IX (not available)

18. *Kurukṣetra* (BookX, Uttarārdha)

19. *Nimi-nava-siddha-saṁvāda*

8. *Guṇamālā*,

(iv) The tale of *Rāma*-

20. *Rāmāyaṇa*, Uttara-kāṇḍa

(v) lyrics-

5. *Bargīta*

0. *Toṭaya*

21. *Bhaṭimā*

(vi) doctrinal treatise-

22. *Bhakti-ratnākara*

(vii) dramas-

23. *Kāli-damana*

24. *Keli-gopāla*

25. *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*

26. *Pārijāta-haraṇa*

27. *Rāma- vijaya* (written in 1490 Śaka/ 1568 A.D.)<sup>17</sup>

**4.4: End of Saint's Life:**

Śaṅkaradeva died on the second day of the bright Moon in the Assamese month of *Bhāda* (August –September) of 1490 Śakābda or 1568 AD. He died in the Koch Kingdom, under the regime of King Naranārāyaṇa,

**4.5: Śaṅkaradeva and Social Reconstruction:**

**4.5.1:-Social Condition:**

The present North-east corner of India during the time of Śaṅkaradeva comprised Assam, Behar, and *Kāmarūpa*. These were the areas which were primarily influenced by the *bhakti* movement. This spiritual and social upsurge was possible under the firm leadership of Śaṅkaradeva who was not merely a religious preacher, but also a dedicated reformer. Till that time *bhakti* movement had gained its hold over the Northern part of India. But in Northeast, specifically in the larger area of Assam, it was led by Śaṅkaradeva. At that time, Assam had a multilayered political system and the erstwhile *Kāmarūpa* was governed by several royal powers like the Chutiyā, the Kachāris, the Āhom, the Koch, and the Jayantiyā and so on. Both the Aryan and Non-Aryan groups of people scattered in the hills and plains on the banks of the Brahmaputra practiced their own distinct, customs manners faiths and religion.

Because of this multilayered political and social setting, there prevailed multi-racial, multilingual and multi-cultural ideologies. 'The diversity was one of the

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<sup>17</sup> Neog, Maheswar. (2018, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam- Śaṅkaradeva and his Times*. Pp. 160-162.

important factors of ancient Assam. This diversity was also found in the multiplicity of religious faiths and practices, which led to a chaotic situation. On the ground of religious faiths and practices, people of this region were divided into different groups and often one against another. The common people of that time had no choice but to profess and practice the faith of their kings and caste chieftains. The social structure was feudalistic. The people's choice was reflected on what the royalty believed, professed and practiced.<sup>18</sup>

This socio-political diversity resulted in clashes and conflicts among the clans, communities and territories. In different places, different social groups emerged and acted as the powerful, hierarchical groups and always tried to dominate the others. Each class was being ruthlessly trampled upon by the upper ones. 'The feudal lords amassed huge property by extorting taxes from the peasantry. In the lowest sections of society along with the peasantry lived in extreme poverty. Under Āhom kingdom, the Paiks had spent one-third of their labour time to the service of the king. The distribution of land was defective and property generally remained scattered.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the society during Śaṅkaradeva's period frequently faced the problems of famines. Mādhavdeva, 'the chief disciple of Śaṅkaradeva had been victims of such famines in his younger days and had to have to resort to begging. According to *Guru Carita Kathā* (GCK), when there was nothing to eat, Mādhavadeva along with his father had to go without food for three meals at a stretch'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pathak, Dayananda. (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p-47

<sup>20</sup> Neog, Maheswar (Ed.). (2012). *Guru Carit Kathā*. p.196.

Even before Śaṅkaradeva, *Vaiṣṇavism* as a religion was prevalent in Assam since the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is warranted by *Viṣṇu* and referenced to the *Bhāgavata* cult in the royal charter issued by the kings of *Varmana*, *Pāla*, and *Śālastambha* dynasties. Along with *Vaiṣṇavism*, many cults like *Śaivism* and *Śaktism* were also prevalent among the people. Even the ideological and ritualistic practices of *Vajrayāna* and the *Hīnayāna* sects of Buddhism were followed by certain groups of people. In such period of history the socio-political and cultural conflicts created an unstable and chaotic atmosphere in the entire region and the ancient *Prāgjyotiṣa* or *Kāmarūpa* became an open area of religion, where everybody had the right to worship as they liked.

#### **4.5.2: Religious Condition:**

Prior to the emergence of Śaṅkaradeva, the ancient Assam had been the place of diverse religions. It was a land of different racial and linguistic communities with different cultural roots and they used to practice their own set of beliefs. The available treatises of the pre- Śaṅkaradeva era shows that many of them worshipped the female deities. Every non-aryan group had its own faith, rites, and rituals. These people followed the practice of animal and human sacrifices to propitiate their deities. The non-aryan groups like Chutiyās were the worshippers of goddess *Kālī* in their own traditional style. The temple of goddess *Kecāikhāitī* at Sadiyā was one of the centers of *Śakti* worship. To satisfy the goddess, animal blood was offered on special occasions. Along with Chutiyās, the Āhoms had their own tribal gods like the *Chomdeo*, *Phurā-Tārā*, *Ālong*, *Tana* and many others. They are also the worshippers of *Śakti*-goddesses. Not only in the Āhom Kingdom, the *Śakti* deities and other sects

of Śaivism were equally popular in *Kāmarūpa* also. During that time, *Kāmarūpa* was a center of Śakti worship in different forms. The *Yoginī Tantra* mentions that the Mother goddess who is rare in other states of India, resided in every home in *Kāmarūpa*.

*anyatra viralā devī kāmarūpe gṛhe gṛhe.*<sup>21</sup>

The *Kāmākhyā* temple of the *Nilāchal Hill* at Guwahati was one of the famous places of the dominant practice of Śaktism and Śaivism in ancient Assam. Worship of *Devī Manasā* too prevailed strongly among certain groups of people in ancient Assam. During the time of Śaṅkaradeva, worshipping *Devī Manasā* was one of the important religious practices of a major section of the people. This is evident from the literary works of that time where the goddess and her power are depicted. Poets like Durgābara, Mankara and Pītāmbara composed powerful verses in praise of *Devī Manasā*. Such literary treatises prove that such non-vaiṣṇavite practices were holding a strong hold at that time.

Along with such multiple religious practices, Vaiṣṇavism too had a powerful hold over the Assamese society. But the nature of Vaiṣṇavism was totally different from the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite philosophy as Lord *Viṣṇu* was the supreme idol and there were the practices of formal rituals in the form of worships and sacrificial practices. These information can be extracted from two Tantric scriptures -*Kālikā Purāṇa* and *Yoginī Tantra*. The scriptures idolize Lord *Viṣṇu*, refer to him several times as a God worthy of worship. According to *Yoginī Tantra*-

*kāmarūpa yathā –viṣṇuḥ sarvasreṣṭho maheśvara  
kāmarūpa pīḥe devīpūjā sarvottamā smṛtā.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Yoginī Tantra*. v. 2/2/6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* v. 2/6/49

In *Kāmarūpa*, although the *Devī* worship was the best, *Viṣṇu* is the worthiest of all gods to be worshipped.

Thus, in ancient Assam, every community had its own religious faiths and followed special rituals, where people were believers in *Śaivism*, *Śāktism*, *Tāntricism*, and *Vaiṣṇavism*. A number of tribal Gods and Goddesses were also being propitiated through typical tribal rituals. Such religious situations of ancient Assam divided the society into small groups and sub-groups antagonistic to each other. In the name of *Śakti* culture, people developed within themselves a degenerative attitude to life. It led to violence, rapacity, and exploitation. This ended in indiscipline, bigotry, intolerance and promiscuity.<sup>23</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva emerged in such a crucial period of time. With his formal education and knowledge gained through experiences, Śaṅkaradeva could realise the urgency of a socio-cultural transformation of the erstwhile Assamese society. He could feel that wellbeing or welfare is more needed than a set of rituals. But this well being should not be limited to one's own individual or personal wellbeing. He felt that personal well being without the common people's wellbeing is meaningless. Again he felt that people were more important than the Kingdom and were superior to anyone. To serve man is to serve God and with this motto, he started the *bhakti* movement. 'His vision was a classless utopia, where all men would be equal and where there would be no repression of man by man. He condemned the continuation of the various forms of religious rituals in ancient Assam and against the bacehic-aphrodisiac in nature like (pancha) 'ma' *kāras* or the five 'm's. These were *Madya* (wine), *Māmsa*

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<sup>23</sup> Pathak, Dayananda. (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 61

(meat), *Matsya* (fish) *Mudrā* (certain configurations of fingers) and *Maithuna* (sexual performance), which was accompanied by lewd dances, salacious songs, the sacrifice of animals (including human) and advocated for new ethics like humanity, compliance, restraint, benevolence, and non-violence, etc were given a high place.’<sup>24</sup>

#### **4.5.3: Political Condition:**

Assam has always held a distinct and independent political existence. ‘Though the process of Hinduisation of the non-aryan tribes went on from early times, the converts were very few and the province remained, therefore, a land of heterogeneous social strains with linguistic divergences existed.’<sup>25</sup> Thus, Assam as the north- east-frontier of the Indian sub-continent with its unique geographical existence always retained a different political existence .It was completely different from the mainland India. The Himalayan region of Bhutan and Tibetis the northern boundary of Assam. In the north east and the east lie the Mishmi hills, the *Pātkai* range, and Manipur. The Luchai hills and the hill Tippera form its southern boundary, while the western boundary line touches the river *Karatoyā*. The great river, the Brahmaputra runs through the heart of the province, and the history and culture of this province are intimately connected.

During the time of Śāṅkaradeva Assam was under a disintegrated political system. The region was divided into multiple, independent territories and small scale leaders or rulers used to rule over the people of those territorial boundaries. A single dynasty or authority did not rule this part of the country. This process of disintegration

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<sup>24</sup> Barman, Sivanath (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Basham, A.L.(1992). *The History of Mediaval Assam*. p. 3

started from the early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. Assam was a medley of many small kingdoms shared by different royal powers from time to time. Many of the small kingdoms could not survive even for a decade because of the onslaughts of their rapacious neighbor kingdoms. Among the notable powers are the Cutiyās, Āhoms, Kachāris, and the Kochs, along with the Nāgās and Bāra Bhūñās. Politically the entire region was in a state of flux. It was divided into different territorial and ideological divisions and ruled by different political powers and each of them desperately tried to devour the other for power. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, an offshoot of the great *Tāis* or *Shans* race entered Assam through the Northeastern boundary. They followed the course of the *Lohit* and eastern tributaries of the Brahmaputra and reached to its valley after crossing the *Pāṭkai*. They first fought with the indigenous people of the region, who were divided into small principalities and were not in a position to resist the advance of the powerful invaders. They had a vast territory centering on Sibsagar (Assam), well up to the present day Nowgaon civil district. Originally, they were stated to be from Thailand. Sukāpha had laid the foundation stone of the Āhom Kingdom as early as 1226 AD. Their reign continued for about 600 years till the advent of British into Assam.

The Āhom kings held their little state with comparatively few changes upto the year 1397. The Ahom rulers had to fight with other territorial rulers like Tipāmias, Chau-hung-pha, the Kamata King, the Bengal Sultan, Ghiyasuddin, Āzam Shah, and the Nāgās. In 1539, Suklenmung the father of Suhungmung defeated Naranārāyaṇa, the Koch King. The same king drove the Kachāris from their stronghold at Dimapur. The Bhūñā chieftains, who had been ruling in the north bank of Brahmaputra, were

brought under Āhom control. In 1552, Sukhāmphā came to the Āhom throne. He made a matrimonial alliance with *Chau-Sui- Kwei*, the *Nara king*. He subdued the Bhūñā and the Nāgās. He fought and ultimately succeeded in repulsing the Kochs from the Āhom land. Again, he entered into another matrimonial relationship with Raghudeva, the Koch King of the eastern branch, and consequently played an important role in the affairs of the eastern Kochs against their rivals the western branch. However, the Āhom had their own language and culture, but their assimilation and acculturation with local Assamese people were total and complete. They started the tradition of writing *Burañjīs* (Histories). For this, they preferred the local Assamese language, and not their ethnic *Tāi-* language, where the seeds of Hinduism were sown in the Āhom Kingdom.

#### **4.5.4: The Major Political group during the time of Śaṅkaradeva:**

##### **4.5.4(i) The Kachāris :**

The *Kachāris* were one of the major groups among the earliest group of Assam and their Mongolian features prove their Sino-Tibetan origin. By the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the *Kachāris* became powerful. This political group had established their control from the eastern border of *Kāmarūpa* to the valley of *Dhansirī* and North Cachar hills. When, *Dikhw* River was ceded to the Āhoms, for the whole 14<sup>th</sup> century, that river served as the boundary between the two kingdoms. The growing power of the Āhom in the east and the Kochs on the west were an inevitable challenge to the *Kachāris*. However, the greatest important feature of the medieval *Kachāris* culture was to be found in the varied architecture of that period, where the ruins of Dimapur

and Maibang bear testimony of their attainment in sculpture, architecture, and engineering.

#### **4.5.4(ii) The Chutiyās :**

The kingdom of *Chutiyā* had an early origin and the eastern part centering around *Śadiyā*, were ruled by the *Chutiyās*. As a community, they belong to the Bodo stock. The *Chutiyās* had a long history of existence, but their political control was established in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. *Chutiyās* held their own struggle with the Āhom until 1523, their last king Dhīr Narāyaṇa was defeated and he and his son or son-in-law were killed in the battlefield. Later, the Āhom king Suhummung annexed the *Chutiyā* regime and appointed a viceroy there and the Āhom borrowed the cultures from the *Chutiyās*.

#### **4.5.4(iii) The Koch or Kamatā Kingdom :**

The regime of the Koch king Naranārāyaṇa, which started in 1540, was the most successful and prosperous period in the political history of medieval *Kāmarūpa*. But in 1581, Raghudeva, the nephew of Naranārāyaṇa rebelled against him and as a result, the state was divided into two parts. Raghudeva established its headquarters at Darrang. In 1584, Naranārāyaṇa was succeeded by his son Lakṣmī Narāyaṇa and established its capital at Koch-Bihar. The period went through enormous changes in the political, social, cultural, and religious aspects of the state. The people of Kamatā under rulers as Durlabh Nārāyaṇa and Naranārāyaṇa became very powerful and prosperous. There was no other power in eastern India to contest the Koch supremacy under Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Sukladvaj or Cilarāi. The advent and influence of Vaiṣṇavism was a major socio-cultural phenomenon for this dynasty. Both

Śaṅkaradeva and his religious ideology have a history of long association with the Koch political group.

#### **4.5.4(iv) Bāra Bhūñā :**

Śaṅkaradeva was a *Bāra Bhūñā*. The *Bāra Bhūñās* were small level administrators who enjoyed a certain territorial boundary. Within this boundary they had enough landed properties along with movable and immovable assets. They were mere vassal lords of the ruling powers without independent political authority. They had to face a near nomadic life at the time of Śaṅkaradeva. As a result, the *Bāra Bhūñās* were uprooted from their own local areas by the marauding political powers.

#### **4.5.4(v) Muslim Invasion :**

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and the later, *Kāmarūpa* was a soft target for the Muslim invaders. The invasion of *Kāmrūpa* by Sultan Ghayesuddin took place in 1321-1322, followed by Muhammad Bin-Tuglag's invasion in 1337-1338, again during the years of 1493-1519, Hussain Shah of *Gauḍa* (Present Bangladesh) attacked *Kāmarūpa* and *Kamatāpura* became one of the major places for their regime.

Amidst such a diversified socio-political scenario, Śaṅkaradeva emerged with a new, visionary outlook. For common men, to establish an one dimensional religious faith among such multicultural people would have been a difficult task. But, Śaṅkaradeva was a man of strong determination and succeeded to think about social resurgence even amidst such chaos. Śaṅkaradeva laid the foundation of a new faith in Assam and propounded *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* and tried to reconstruct greater Assamese society through his *bhakti* culture.

#### 4.5.5: Impact of All India- *Bhakti* Movement and the Pilgrimages:

*Bhakti* Movement was in the flourishing state in India in the fourteenth and fifteenth century AD. It was a powerful socio-religious awakening which offered a new experience and understanding of religion and devotion to the erstwhile Indian mass. This new wave of religious ideology was free from ritualistic formalities, was more simplistic in features and was more accessible to each and every person of the society. Vaiṣṇava saints like Rāmānanda (1299-1410 AD) of north India, Kabīra (1398-1518 AD) of Benaras, Nāmadeva (1270-1350 AD) and Tukārāma (1608-1649 AD) of Maharashtra, Nānaka (1469-1539AD) of Punjab, Vallabhacarya (1479-1531 AD) of Andhra and Vrajamandala, Tulsidāsa (1523-1623 AD) in the United provinces and Chaitanyadeva (1486-1553AD) of Bengal disseminated the messages of *bhakti* to the masses in respective places of India.

During that time, Assam was a composite mixture of various religious teachings and practices. The practitioners of *Śaktism*, *Tantricism*, *Śaivism*, Buddhism and ancient *Vaiṣṇavism* have worshipped different gods and goddesses like *Śiva*, *Durgā*, *Viṣṇu*, *Kālī*, Buddha, and *Tārā*, etc. Lord *Ganesh* was also worshipped by a large number of people. Various ritual performances and religious faiths prevailed at that time making the social and religious condition deteriorated. The two books *Kālikā Purāṇa* and *Yoginī Tantra* have mentioned about it. It shows that no definite, strong and religious trend persisted in the society. Rather because of the prevalence of numerous ideologies and internal conflicts the social set up became chaotic. In such a critical situation, Śāṅkaradeva of Assam emerged in 1449 AD and initiated Neo-vaiṣṇavite movement under the influence of all India-*bhakti* movement, where he

began restructuring the Assamese society through *Kṛṣṇa bhakti*. Thus, the impact of all India *bhakti* movement was one of the important backgrounds of Śaṅkaradeva for the social reconstruction in Assamese.

Śaṅkaradevamade two long pilgrimages in his lifetime. These two pilgrimages opened the horizon of new experiences for Śaṅkaradeva. The first pilgrimage was set out in 1481 AD and the second one was in 1550 AD. 'In both the pilgrimage, he visited all the leading religious shrines of the country and met different reformers of the time. They shared their mutual experiences with Śaṅkaradeva. Such experiences consolidated his mindset towards *bhakti* or *Kṛṣṇa* consciousness and encouraged social reconstruction of the Assamese society.'<sup>26</sup> During his pilgrimage, 'the famous Goswami brothers- Rūpa and Sanatana took initiation from Śaṅkaradeva at *Vṛndāvana*. A distinguished person known as Vṛndavan Das became the disciple of Śaṅkaradeva at *Vṛndāvana*. With him the Ramākānta of Upa Dwaraka and poet Gopinath of *Puskar* became his disciples.'<sup>27</sup> Even, the *Pāṇḍās* of Jagannath temple welcomed Śaṅkaradeva and they came forward to *Atharanala*.

From his pilgrimages, he learnt the basic teachings of *Bhakti* movement and also learnt the fact that mere rituals or isolated preaching cannot be the symbol of religion. Religion should rather be more attached to common mass. He tasted the elements of *bhakti* movement throughout northern India as well as eastern India, from Purī in the east to Dvārakā in the west, from Badarikāshrama in the north to Rameswaram in the south. He completed his first pilgrimage in 1492 and the second

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<sup>26</sup> Pathak, Dayananda.(2012). *Beautiful Mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 31

<sup>27</sup> Lekharu,Upendra Ch.(2016-6th edition).*Katha Guru Carit*. Pp.24-25

was in 1552 AD. The *Bhakti* movement meted out the principle of birth and caste, which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and ritual. To that extent the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. Leaders of the *Bhakti* movement as well as the followers belonged to all strata of the society and everyone enjoyed the liberty to express their feelings in respective forms including literature, songs, dramatic performances, group performances etc. Śaṅkaradeva could feel that there was the need of an urgent change of the religio-cultural situation of Assam. These two pilgrimages helped him collecting those elements which he used for his Reconstructionist approaches under the idea of Neo -Vaiṣṇavism.

#### **4.6: Social Reconstruction Philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva:**

##### **4.6.1: Supreme reality:**

‘The world around human beings is either material or ideal and spiritual. The material objects and phenomena include everything that relates to objectivity. The sphere of mental activity like- thought sensations, and emotion, etc are related to the ideal and spiritual. The character of this connection and the relation of thought to being on the spiritual to the material constitute the fundamental questions of philosophy.’<sup>28</sup> Śaṅkaradeva’s social-reconstruction philosophy was based on *Dāśya bhakti*, where *Kṛṣṇa* was considered as the Lord and the disciple as his servant. In Sanskrit, it is called *Sevya* and *Sevaka* (master and servant). This *Kṛṣṇa* is none, but

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<sup>28</sup> Hanna, George. (Ed.). (1963). *Marxist Philosophies*. p.10.

the manifestation of *Brahma* , the supreme reality, whom Śaṅkarācārya describes as the only truth:

*ślokārdhena probakṣāmi yaduktom granthakoṭibhiḥa/*

*brahma satyaṁ jaganmithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ/*<sup>29</sup>

What thousands of religious books explained, I can express it with a half of the *Śloka* that *Brahma* is the truth, the whole universe is false, but *Jīva*, the soul is none other than the *Pseudo-Brahma*.

Thus, Śaṅkaradeva 's philosophy advocates that the *Brahman* (supreme soul) is the supreme truth, *Brahman* and *Īśvara* (God) are the same, *Brahman*(God) is there in every entity, *Īśvara* (God) and his creation are not different from one another, *Jīva* (creature) is a component of *Īśvara* (God), the former constitutes the body of the latter. The creation is temporary, but not real, *Māyā* (illusion) is an act of God and its influence can be avoided by his grace and one becomes God as one realizes the identity of God and his creation. Hence, Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, being simple and direct, cascaded into the hearts of people. This new wave of religious ideology became popular as *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*. It calls for devotion to one supreme power, surrender to that power and devotion through chanting the name of that power. Śaṅkaradeva believed that he who becomes a source of pleasure himself becomes a source of pleasure to *Brahma*.

In simple terms; Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical thought pronounces that the whole world is *Māyā* (Illusion) and hence, both *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are governed by

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<sup>29</sup> Śaṅkarācārya, *VivekchuDamanih*, v.20, cited in [www.Sankritdocuments.org](http://www.Sankritdocuments.org), Advaita Ashrama, Swami Madhavananda, 2017> accessed on 24/1/2017

*Mādhava* or God. These philosophical thoughts of Śaṅkaradeva are clearly reflected in the writings of Mādhavadeva, the chief disciple of Śaṅkaradeva. In *Nām-ghoṣā (Īśvara Nirṇaya)* Mādhavadeva wrote-

*prakṛti puruṣa duiro niyantā mādhava/  
samastare ātmā hari parama bāndhava//<sup>30</sup>*

It means- *Mādhava* i.e. *Īśvara* is the creator and controller of both matter and individual self, and *Hari* is the soul of all creatures and He is the real friend.

Śaṅkaradeva believed that *Brahman* or *Mādhava* was the cause, the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer of the universe and He is the omnipotent and omniscient being. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva said –

*namo nārāyaṇa jagata kāraṇa/  
khaṇḍiyo saṁsāra bhaya.//<sup>31</sup>*

It means- Oh, God *Nārāyaṇa*, you are the cause of the universe so we plead you to get us rid of the fear of this material world.

Again he writes-

*nitya niraṅgaṇa svaprakāśa ātmā eka/  
māyā upādhirā pade dekhiyo aneka//<sup>32</sup>*

It means, *Ātmā* is invincible and itself visible and unique. But it's visible in many forms due to lack of knowledge.

These thoughts of Śaṅkaradeva are already reflected in the *R̥gveda*, V.1/164/46 in the following manner-

<sup>30</sup> Madhavdeva, *Nām-ghoṣā (Īśvar Nirṇoy)*, v.405

<sup>31</sup> *Kirttan-ghoṣā, Balichalana*. v. 640

<sup>32</sup> *Bhāgavata*, Book X, *Kṛṣṇar Kurukṣetra-yārtā*, v. 511

*ekaṁ sadviprā bahudhā vadantynim/*

*yamaṁ mātariśvānamāhuḥ//*

Again, Śaṅkaradeva writes-

*vibhañjiyā āpunāka prabhu nārāyaṇa/*

*srajlā indriya yata prāṇa buddhi mana/<sup>33</sup>*

It means - dividing Himself, Lord *Nārāyaṇa* created the senses, the matters, the lives, and the mind. By incarnating in small parts, God *Kṛṣṇa* sustains the world again and again.

To establish the supremacy of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* Śaṅkaradeva wrote it in his work, *Nimi-nava-sidda-saṁvāda*, Verse-114 as follows:

*kālarūpī kṛṣṇa yīto jagata ādhāra/*

*karanta līlāye pāche śṛṣṭika saṁhāra//*

It means -*Kṛṣṇa*, the foundation of the world is capable of destroying his own creation.

This verse of Śaṅkaradeva is also found in the 11<sup>th</sup> *Adhyāya* of *Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā*, verse 32 (thirty-two)-

*kālo'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho*

*lokān samāhartumiha prayttaḥ//*

*rti'pi vām na bhaviṣyanti sarve*

*ye'vasthitaḥ pratyantīkeṣu yodhā*

Here the Lord *Kṛṣṇa* said to Arjuna 'I am mighty, destroying the world in the form of time, now engaged herein slaying these men. Even without you, all these warriors standing arrayed in the opposing armies shall not live'.

<sup>33</sup> *Nimi-nava-sidda-saṁvāda* v. 110

In favour of it ,Śaṅkaradevawrites-

*namo paripurṇa brahma ananta śakati/*

*janme janme tayu pāve thākoka bhakati.//<sup>34</sup>*

It means, O perfect *Brahma*, the omnipotent, let there be devotion to your feet in each birth.

To support Lord *Kṛṣṇa* as a supreme creator, Śaṅkaradeva writes-

*sraṣṭārese sraṣṭā tumi sarvadraṣṭā*

*uddhāri dharilā bhūmi//<sup>35</sup>*

It means, you are the creator of the creator and the omniscient and you lifted the world up.

Thus, the transcendent points of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy believed that *Brahma* is devoid of all distinctions. He said-

*mayātese dekhaya bibidhā paricchda/*

*savrūpata tomāre nāhike kichu bheda//<sup>36</sup>*

It means, it is because of *Māyā* that various distinctions are seen in you. In truth you have no distinction at all.

Śaṅkaradeva's social reconstruction philosophy advocates that devotion is perfect when it is centralised and dedicated to one. Diversion of devotion is nothing but misutilisation of power and energy. It was a kind of enlightening message to the confused mass of erstwhile Assam who were engrossed in rituals and worships of

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<sup>34</sup> *Bhāgavata*, Book X, v. 1846

<sup>35</sup> *Kīrtana ghoṣā, symantakharāṇa*, v. 1437

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, v. 2101

innumerable deities. Purification of soul was insisted by Śaṅkaradeva, which is the foundation of upliftment of an individual and the society as well.

Śaṅkaradeva believed in the disappearance of the distinction between the soul and the *Brahma*. It is possible even in one's lifetime; one should not wait for death.

The example of this thought is found in his literary work *Bhāgavata* as follows-

*ahaṅkāra gucile brahmaka jīve dekhe//*  
*māyā eri āpuni buddhira gucai bhrama /*  
*nirmala hṛdaya jīve dekhe parabrahma/*  
*yikālata jñana astre chede ahaṅkāra//*  
*chiṅḍe karmabandha jīve teve āpunāra/*  
*hṛdayāte parama ānande hove jāta//*  
*paripurṇa ātmā hoai manate sakṣāta*<sup>38</sup>

It means, the *Jīva* perceives the *Brahman* when the egoism is removed. When the *Māyās* and the error of intellect disappear, he perceives *Brahman* in his clear mind. When he tears off the egoism with the sword of wisdom, he breaks the bondage of *Karma* off. The highest happiness arises in his heart and he perceives the perfect self (*Brahman*) in the mind. Turning himself into the *Brahman* he does not see his body.

Again, Śaṅkaradeva wrote—

*śravaṇa kīrttana kare yīto āka/*  
*kariyā dṛḍha biśvāsa//*  
*ehi janamate teji māyā moha/*

<sup>38</sup> *Bhāgavata*, Book XII, Vv.177-78

*hoyaya brahma āpuni*<sup>39</sup>

It means, chanting of the name of the Almighty and active listening to it helps one achieving him/her the stature of *Brahma*. He who hears and sings this with firm beliefs, being relieved of his mental illusion, becomes himself the *Brahman* even in his birth.

This philosophy of single divinity as propagated by Śaṅkaradeva is also found in the verses of *Nimi-nava- siddha- samvāda* in the following

*svabhāve yi kare dāna homa mahā*

*tapa japa tīrtha vrata/*

*kāyavākya mane yateka ācarai*

*laukika vaidika karma/*

*huyā ekamata īśvara kṛṣṇata*

*arpiba sisaba dharmā//*

*nitya naimittika yata jāti dharmā/*

*āśramara yata karma/*

*kṛṣṇata arpile jānā sehi hove*

*mahābhāgavata dharmā//*

*garba ahamkāra tyaji yiṭo jane*

*ācare karma bhakati/*

*tāte mahātuṣṭa huyā kṛṣṇādenta*

*baikuṅṭha yata sampatti*<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Nimi-nava-siddha-samvāda*, v.424

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, vv.53-54

It means, if you offer all forms of prayer and meditation, help the needy one with all purity in mind as mentioned in *Vedic dharma* and if these are dedicated to Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, they will take the form of *Bhāgavata dharma*. One who can keep away all personal feelings of being proud of his path of devotion, the Lord *Kṛṣṇa* will lead him to the path of *Vaikuṇṭha* (heaven in this earth).

Similarly, this philosophy is echoed in the *Veda-stuti* of *Kīrtan-ghoṣā* where Śaṅkaradeva writes-

*nāhi dehendriya samasta karttāra*  
*śaktika dharā ekale/*  
*tumisi sarvvajña tumi sarvvakarttā*  
*tohmāka sevai sakale//*  
*yena cakravartī rājāka yogāvai*  
*sāmarāje karabhāra/*  
*brahmā ādi kari devara īśvara*  
*tayu pāve namaskāra//<sup>41</sup>*

It means- as the kings and subjects pay homage to the superior king with taxes, all gods including *Brahmā* himself bow down to you with honour.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the spiritual philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva is founded on the earnest devotion to Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. Such devotion does not need ritualistic performances; it simply needs the honesty in chanting the names of God, listening to his life and activities with pure dedication to the supreme power. If analysed closely, it can be said that it was a unique concept by Śaṅkaradeva for the

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<sup>41</sup> *Kīrtan-ghoṣā, Veda-stuti*, v. 1664

social reconstruction of the society. It is because; it was free from any economic, physical and cultural barriers. Anyone, irrespective of caste, class and gender can practice these functions .It was devoid of untouchability also .Through this *Eka Śarana Hari Nāma Dharma* , Śaṅkaradeva sowed the seed of equal accessibility and simplicity .Hence it is rightly said, ‘Śaṅkaradeva was only the philosopher who practiced in life, whatever philosophical ideas he cherished and taught it to the people.Śaṅkaradeva could establish an integral philosophy only because he had an integral view of life. Actually, Śaṅkaradeva created a paramedical philosophy covering a wide spectrum of beliefs. It was the only philosophy that facilitates a journey from gross to subtle. It covers all ideas ranging from dualism to monism. It was the first practical philosophy of India that was fully in tune with a religious cult’.<sup>42</sup>

#### **4.6.2: Egalitarian Society:**

‘The egalitarian doctrines maintain that all humans are equal in fundamental worth or social status.’<sup>43</sup>Thus, egalitarianism as a philosophy believes that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities. The religious and social ideologies of Śaṅkaradeva undoubtedly contain the elements of egalitarianism.As mentioned above, his religion was founded on simplistic, minimal rituals which can be practiced by any human being .Caste, gender or class never creates any hurdle to practice his religion. So inspite of being a religious master, he can better be termed as a social reformer who dismisses the prevailing social evils by introducing an accessible and simplistic religion. As a social reformer, Śaṅkaradeva was deeply

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<sup>42</sup> Borthakur,*Mahāpuraṣha Jyoti*. p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Zalta,Edward N.(1995). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. p.67.

concerned with the plight of the down-trodden. An offshoot of a feudal society and being a feudal family, Śaṅkaradeva's motto of life and thinking were different and he was kindhearted to everybody. He did not indulge in caste- creed and high and low differences in the society. His disciples belong to every strata of the society. *Nāmghar* or the *Thān* was a public space where everybody can participate in religious or cultural activities. He, therefore, supported his disciple Mādhavadeva and his following verse of *Nām-ghoṣā*-

*noho jānā āmi cāri jāti      cāriyo aśramī noho āti*  
*noho dharmmaśīla dāna vrata tīrthagāmī /*  
*kintu purṇānanda samudrara      gopībharttā pada komalara*  
*dāsaro dāsara tāna dāsa bhailo āmi.*<sup>44</sup>

This means -We are not divided into four castes i.e. *Brāhmmana*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Sudra*. We do not adhere to four walks of Vedic social life i.e. *Brahmacarya*, *Gārhashtya*, *Bāṇaprastha* and *Yati* or *Sanyāsa* and we are not so wealthy to sacrifice wealth and money to the needy people, not performing *Yajña* and follow the rituals of *Vrata*, even we are not accustomed to visit religious shrines. But, we are out and out the mere slaves of that supreme soul, who is full of pleasure, and who is the husband and the owner of the hearts of the *Gopis*, whose lotus-like feet is our ultimate aim.

With a vision of propounding the philosophy of egalitarianism, Śaṅkaradeva's works and activities fought against inequality and discrimination in society. Through *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva wished to create an egalitarian society by transforming the attitude of people. He could feel that political division and religious confusions turned

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<sup>44</sup> Mādhavadeva, *Nām-ghoṣā*, v.670

the common people aimless. In the name of religion, divisions among classes were created. Political divisions led to the idea of rivalry and enmity among people. One community considers the others inferior to them and always thinks of dominating. Hence, Śaṅkaradeva's primary aim was to sow the seed of egalitarian ideology to develop liberalism and a tolerant spirit. 'Śaṅkaradeva had a clear vision of the future society where all men would be equal and where there would be no repression of man by man. He, however, realized that the translation of his vision into reality would necessitate a radical change of the whole socio-economic infrastructure and that this was a task which, in the age of rising social classes, was altogether beyond his capacity.'<sup>45</sup>

The literary works were the major weapons of Śaṅkaradeva to propound the idea of egalitarianism. A close analysis of his major works clearly reveals that call for equality was what dominated his philosophy. The following are some examples of egalitarian thought of Śaṅkaradeva as available in his literary works:

*caṇḍāle kariche hari kīrtana/  
buliyā ninde yito ajñajana//  
tāka sambhāṣaṇa yijane karai/  
ājanmara puṇya tekhane harai//<sup>46</sup>*

It means- only a fool may be there to denounce singing of *Hari Nāma* as the outcaste's nuisance. If a man shows honour to such a fool, he loses his all of his virtues acquired since birth.

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<sup>45</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p. 47

<sup>46</sup> *Kīrtana-ghoṣā, Pāṣaṇḍa- marddana*, v.88

Śaṅkaradeva tried to establish the idea of equality through his religious principles. He repeatedly refers to the concept of *Dāsya* –the complete surrender. It does not need a priest, nor does it need any ritual. Just by following simplistic ways of devotion, one can achieve the status of a pure devotee. If analysed closely, here Sankardeva dismisses the structural division of hierarchy of religious authorities which was a contemporary practice. Rather, in the *Kīrttana ghoṣā* he mentions nine types of *Bhakti* through the following verses:

*śravaṇa kīrttana smaraṇa viṣṇura*  
*arccana pāda sevana/*  
*dāsya sakhitva vandana viṣṇuta*  
*kariba deha arpaṇa//*  
*navavidha bhakti viṣṇuta ācārai*  
*sehise pāṭha uttama/*  
*hena śuni pāche hiraṇyakaśipu*  
*kope kāmpe yena yama.//<sup>47</sup>*

It means- Hearing and Singing of *Viṣṇu*'s attributes, meditation on him, offerings to *Viṣṇu*; worship at his feet, acting as a servant, or a friend; ultimate surrender of the self, cultures of these nine systems of devotion to *Viṣṇu* constitute the text of study. Hearing of it, Hiraṇyakaśipu, in rage as *Yama* trembled. For the common men of erstwhile Assam, it was such a simple way of practicing religion where there was no need of sacrifice or a priest, any religious authority. They could feel how anyone can practice the religious activities without any imposition, devoid of fear and economic expenditure. So, it ultimately proves that beyond religion, Śaṅkaradeva aimed more at social reconstruction on the foundation of equality. Again the saint says-

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid, Pralādacaritra, v.340*

*yīto cāṇḍālāra kāya vākya mane*  
*sadāye sumare hari/*  
*āche bāhravrata yīto brāhmaṇara*  
*si si śreṣṭha āta kari/*  
  
*si si mahāgarbbī vipre āponāka*  
*pavitra karibe nāre/*  
*bhakata cāṇḍāle āponāko tāre*  
*samasta kula uddhāre/”<sup>48</sup>*

It means- if the *Cāṇḍāla* recalls *Hari* or God ever with body, words and mind, he can also become superior to the *Brāhmaṇa*. One who keeps twelve *Vratas*, the *Brāhmaṇa* of the kind with too much pride; fails to purify himself, the devotee *Cāṇḍāla* can save himself, along with his whole race.

Another instance-

*dāmbhika śaṭhata nakahibā iṭo tattva/*  
*sadā upadeśa dibā vaiṣṇava janata//*  
*strī sūdro karai yadi āmāta bhakati/*  
*tāhāta kahibā iṭo jñāna mahāmāti //”<sup>49</sup>*

Here Lord *Kṛṣṇa* advises his devotee *Uddhava* ‘don’t reveal this truth to the proud and the rogues; give advice ever to persons who are *Vaiṣṇavas*. Even, if women and *Sūdras* offer me devotion reveals to them its content, O noble one’. Here it is seen how women are too allowed the equal position in Śaṅkaradeva’s religious order. It was a very modern, progressive idea to open the door of religion even to the marginalised sections like the women and the untouchables.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, v. 441

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, *Śrīkṛṣṇar vaikunṭha prayāṇa*, v.1826

The saint pronounces further-

*yata jīva jaṅgama kīṭa pataṅgama/  
aga naga jaga teri kāyā.//<sup>50</sup>*

That is, all the creatures, movable or immovable are the particles of God's body.

*dekhi sakhigaṇe jono hāsai āsi beḍhi/  
mai sādhu iṭo cora hena lajjā eri//  
kukura śṛgāla garddabharo ātmārāma/  
jāniya savāko pari karibā praṇāma//<sup>51</sup>*

It means - souls of dogs, jackals, and asses are the particles of God. Hence, they are also to be worshipped by people, and these are the characteristics of the actual devotee. These lines can be interpreted as the flagship statements of egalitarianism as the saint prescribes the equal position even for the animals. Pure devotion does not follow any class division. Respect to a pure soul is the ultimate identity of a perfect devotee. Thus though Śaṅkaradeva here talks about religion, the deeper implication is that philosophy of eradication of social division matters him the most. Appealing the devotees to respect even to the animal was a revolutionary statement of equality on the basis of which he wanted to establish a new society.

*huyā śauca karā nite manaka saṁyama/  
diyā dāna samastake budhi kari sama//  
parara dharmaka nihiṁsibā kadācita/  
karibā bhūtaka dāyā sakaruṇa citta. //<sup>52</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> Śaṅkaradeva, *Bargīt.* no-04

<sup>51</sup> *Śrīkrṣṇara vaikuntha prayāṇa*, v.1823

<sup>52</sup> *Bhakti- pradīpa*, vv.140-41

It means, be happy always by controlling your passions, think everybody equally, and offer everybody equally. Be not jealous of others' religion and be compassionate to every creature. Such lines clearly reveal Śaṅkaradeva's advocacy for tolerance, brotherhood and peace. Moreover it also shows that religion for the saint was a medium to upgrade the society. He was surprisingly secular even in the fifteenth century. Modern politics insists on secularism and harmony. But these ideologies were already available in Śaṅkaradeva's religious philosophy.

These are only few examples of his literary compositions where there are clarion calls for inculcation of equality, upgradation, brotherhood and harmony. Actually all of his compositions are full of such ideologies where the saint repeatedly attempted to teach the Assamese people the importance of a democratic and equality and requested to establish an egalitarian society.

- *śudrata janama yāra veda utsārana tara/  
nāhi jena adikāra//*<sup>53</sup>

It means-those who are born in lower caste i.e *Śudra*, they have no right to chanting the veda.

- *śūdra gaṇa adhama yavana/  
āno yata pāpi nara//  
huyā tattavpara vaiṣṇava janara/  
yadi līlā śikṣā dhare//*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Barua, Harinarrayan Dutta (Ed). (2011). *Bhāgavata*. v.12390, p.939

<sup>54</sup> *op.cit*, v.181, p.235, *Bhāgavata*, v.2/181

The teachings of Vaiṣṇavism can enlighten the path even for the low-caste people like *Yavana*, women and *Śudras* .

- *mahāpāpī ati adhama jāti/  
tāko nāme kare pavirta ati//<sup>55</sup>*

The power of *Nāma* is so strong that even the sinners, the criminals, the low caste get purified under its influence

- *kukurako khāyi yiṭo mahā mleccha jāti  
tāto kari apavitra siṭo āti.<sup>56</sup>*

It means- *Mlecchas* are addicted to eating dogs, hence they are neglected as low caste. But the selfish people are more inferior and dull than the *Mlecchas*.

From the above examples, it is clear that Śāṅkaradeva sends a message that chanting and hearing of *Hari –Nāma* is the ultimate solution to establish an egalitarian society. Therefore, his egalitarian ideals enlivened the people for a new social restructuring and renewed the spirit of the Assamese society.

#### **4.6.3: Social Reconstruction through Institutional Structure (*Nāmghar* or Village Chapels) and Community Consciousness:**

One of the important institutional structures of Neo-vaiṣṇavite movement initiated by Śāṅkaradeva was *Kīrttanghar* or *Nāmghar*. It is an innovative and multi-dimensional institution founded by Śāṅkaradeva. This institution was founded by Śāṅkaradeva in 1509 at Bardowā, presently at Nagaon district of Assam. But the idea of the *Nāmghar* was conceived by Śāṅkaradeva even 1468 AD. *Nāmghar* was

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<sup>55</sup> *Kīrttan-ghoṣā*, v.2035

<sup>56</sup> *Bhakti-pradīpa*, v.88

conceived as the public space where the devotees can assemble for practicing the religious activities. It can be called as a space designed to preach the devotees by the preachers as well as to discuss, interact among the villagers about religious or spiritual matters. The primary functions of *Kīrttanghar* or *Nāmghar* are to propagate Vaiṣṇava faith and to develop the religious feelings among the devotees. Its main function is to arrange the *Nāma* or *Kīrtana*. Simply, it is a place where chanting and listening to the scriptures are done by a group of devotees.

The architectural structures of the *Nāmghar* or *Kīrttanghar* consist of four parts. These are – the *Korāpat* (gate), *Rangolicarā* (porch), chanting hall and *Moṇikūṭ* (abode of God). The *Maṇikūṭis* considered as the abode of God and the *Cāri hāti* accommodate the disciples for the worship of God or *Hari*. The *Siṃhāsana* or *Thāpanā* (alter of God) are placed in the *Moṇikūṭ* with *Bhāgavata Śāstra* for worship. For the first time, Śaṅkaradeva started the practices of *Nāma-Prasaṅga* regularly with his followers and devotees at *Kīrttanghar* or *Nāmghar*. With the passage of time, *Nāmghars* turned out to be a significant social institution for the Assamese mass. Though primarily used as a religious space, the internal arrangement of the institution and its multidimensional use as a community space, make it more a democratic institution with immense contributions in social reconstruction. It was a center of community sentiment irrespective of all caste, creed, sex, and religion, a place of core ethical values and spiritual realization with spreading the Vaiṣṇavite faith.

*Nāmghars* are not mere places of chanting and hearing the name of God or religious functions. Rather it is also a place where the idea of skill development is practiced in a collective way. Skill development as a theory refers to the ability and

capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carryout complex activities or job functions involving ideas and things. All these components of skill development, i.e, practices, and ideas are reflected in the institution of *Nāmghar* or village chapels by Śāṅkaradeva. As for examples, some of the disciples of Śāṅkaradeva used to prepare images of God by cutting and carving woods for idols of Hanumān, Garuḍa, bird, Tortoise, Elephant, Horse, Boar, Brahmā with four-faced peculiarity and *Vāmana* etc. *Nāmghar*, thus provided the scope and space to develop their carving skill in a artistic, creative manner .These disciples of Śāṅkaradeva also used to plough the field to produce pulses of different kinds and cultivate seeds and paddy. Simply, through this institution, the Vaiṣṇava saint Śāṅkaradeva used to teach his followers to work for him and others for livelihood. Whenever the *Bhāona* performances are organised, people of the village go for making masks, playing of musical instruments, preparing of stage properties, sitting mates etc. The skills of acting, singing and playing musical instruments are also nurtured in the space of the *Nāmghar*. Hence, the *Nāmghar* or village chapels became one of the important centers of productive materials which directly indicated the practical implements of the theory and skill development in society. It also encourages to working collectively for greater benefit of the society. During the religious, cultural or dramatic events, all the villagers used to work collectively .they do their duties without any imposition. The inculcation of the collective spirit and the feeling to work for the greater society is one of the major reconstructionist steps initiated by the institution of *Nāmghar*.

Śaṅkaradeva had a vision that all men would be equal. 'He believed that the caste system, untouchability, etc were such problems, which created hatred, meaningless vanity, and class hierarchy and complex behavioural issues among the people. Śaṅkaradeva himself considered the caste system and social inequality as major form of social injustice. It always results in relative deprivation which hampers the holistic development of the society as a whole. As a reformer, he never ventured to do away with the caste system altogether and simply tried to loosen its grip over the masses.'<sup>57</sup> In the context of the time of Śaṅkaradeva, economic condition was dependent on the social position of the people. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva believed that equality in the spiritual domain was the main instrument of social change and it has emerged from the core of the *Nāmghar* or village chapels. Because, *Nāmghar* spreads the message that the highest religion is the religion of loving all without any discrimination and a place of unity and brotherhood among all sections of the people. Hence, as an institution, *Nāmghar* still serves a milestone for the unification, mutual understanding, and spirit of co-operation with spreading the knowledge through scientific basis, community consciousness, and strengthening the socio-religious and cultural life of the Assamese society.

#### **4.7: Other Areas of Social Reconstruction:**

##### **4.7.1: Śaṅkaradeva and *Bhakti*:**

*Bhakti* means a loyal attitude to a superior one. In the field of religion; *bhakti* is identical with a loyal attitude to the superior soul, i.e. God. In simple words, *bhakti*

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<sup>57</sup> Barman, Sivanath.(2017). *Śaṅkaradeva: His Multidimensional Contribution (Key note address)* International Seminer, 23rd -25<sup>th</sup> February. MSSV. Nagaon.

means the loyal attitude to God by his devotees. In general, *bhakti* has been classified into nine kinds, they are -*Śravaṇa* (active listening) *Kīrtana* (chanting) *Smarāṇa* (remembering) *Vandana* (praising) *Archana* (prayer), *Dāśya* (servility) *Pādasevana* (serving the golden feet of the Lord) *Sakhittva* (friendship) and *Ātmanivedana* (total surrender of self to the Lord). *Bhakti* means the absolute self- surrender to a supreme power and a feeling of joy and happiness borne out of this selfless surrender. It was based on faith and not in dialectics. This same philosophy of complete surrender and selfless pleasure is what echoed in the ideas of *bhakti* disseminated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam. It is the means and ends of human existence.

The socio-political condition of Assam in the time of Śaṅkaradeva was a confusing and chaotic one. 'It was full of ethnic rivalries, political turmoils, social repression, natural calamities, and frequent famines. The whole land was divided into small territories ruled by different ethnic groups like the Kachāris, the Kochs, the Āhoms and the Bhūñās. These groups often engaged themselves in bloody feuds that took toll of many lives. Śaṅkaradeva himself faced several such feuds and had to flee from one place to another to save himself and his community.'<sup>58</sup> Śaṅkaradeva was aware of this hostile social condition and the consequent problems. He could feel that without an urgent socio-political reform, Assam would not be able to walk towards progress. Therefore he decided to go for disseminating a new spiritual and religious philosophy of *Bhakti* with some new, refined elements. Through *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva wants to reconstruct the fragmented society. It was rightly observed by Sivanath Barman in the following words-

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<sup>58</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p.46

‘to hold the newly formed general society together, a kind of ideological bondage between the different classes of society had become a historical necessity: for stability in that a society was impossible without the allegiance of peasants to landlords, landlords to vassals, vassals to the king, etc. The spirit of allegiance was supplied by the concept of *bhakti* initiated by Śaṅkaradeva’<sup>59</sup>.

Śaṅkaradeva, in his philosophy refers to nine types of *bhakti*. Among these nine types, one of the important forms of *bhakti* is known as *Dāsya* (servility) *bhakti*. Through this *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva makes a spiritual relationship between master and servant and he believes that this spiritual thought helps common people to identify their position in society. In *Kīrtana Ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva wrote about this master-servant relationship in the following verse-

*tohmāra akāma bhṛtya āmi/  
tumiyo niṣkāma mora svāmī//  
nāhi kāma āhmāra anyathā/  
nuhi rājasevakara yathā//*<sup>60</sup>

It means- I am thine servent desireless, thou art also my master desireless. I have no other desire at all, as cherished by servants royal.

Again, this spiritual *bhakti* philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva has been also found in *Bhagavadgītā* in verse 8, chapter XII and the aphorism of *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*. In the *Bhagavadgītā* it is mentioned in the following-

*mayeva mana ādhatsva maye budhiṁ niveśaya/  
nivaśiṣyasi mayeva ata udham na samśayah//*<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Barman, Sivanath.*op.cit*,p.29

<sup>60</sup> *Kīrtana ghoṣā,Prahlāda caritra*, v.451

<sup>61</sup> *Bhagavadgītā ,Bhaktiyoga*, Chapter XII,v.8

It means- fix your mind on me alone, rest your thoughts on me alone, and in me alone you will live hereafter. Of this there is no doubt.

Similarly, the aphorism of *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, in verse -2 said that

*sā tvasmin parama premarūpā*

It means *bhakti* has been described as the supreme love towards him (God).

In the hagiography, *Kathā Guru Carita*, this *bhakti* philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva about the master-servant relationship is found in the following verse-

*tohmāra bhṛtyaro bhṛtyara tāro bhṛtya bhailo āmi/  
moka jagannātha, nakarā anātha, neribā mādhava svāmī//<sup>62</sup>*

Thus, the above-mentioned references prove that Śaṅkaradeva's thought on *bhakti* was easily practiced and was accessible to all people irrespective of caste and creed, the high and low. Hence, Śaṅkaradeva conceives *bhakti* as the summum-bonum of life and even superior to *mukti* (salvation). In his philosophy, *bhakti* is conceived as to be-all and end-all of life. Therefore, he believed that '*bhakti* is the highest desire and wealth (*vitta*) and the germ of liberation. It is the solace of life, the vital breath of the body. There are no other ways of life except *bhakti* in this world and the next.'<sup>63</sup>

#### **4.7.2: Spirituality:**

Spirituality is a conscience approach to life inherent with a system of ethical and moral values unfolded by humanity. Regarding the meaning of spirituality, the speech of the prophet Jesus Christ in the *Bible* is still very relevant. He said 'love the enemy, do well to them that do harm to thee'. In Indian philosophy, spirituality

<sup>62</sup> Lekharu, Upendra. Ch.(Ed.).(2016).*Kathā Guru Carit*. Pp.81-82.

<sup>63</sup> Sharma, S.N.(1966).*The Neo- Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Pp. 49-50.

consists of the total orientation of human personality away from selfishness and directing it towards the good of all living beings and sharing their joys and sorrows, which would provide peace and tranquility to the heart of people.

In general, society is to be reconstructed based on spiritual values, where love is the means of winning the hearts of the people and building a peaceful society. All human efforts are directed towards rebuilding a society based on spiritual values of love and tolerance. Therefore, regarding social reconstruction, a healthy and harmonious society could exist only when its members imbibe moral and ethical values like love, sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and sense of duty. Only such values ensure mutual aid and cooperation in social life.

Śaṅkaradeva's principles under Neo- Vaiṣṇavism are based on love, liberalism, equality, morality, and tolerant spirit. From the discussions on his approaches towards *Bhakti* and mediums of practices of the religion, it has been clear that he kept no distinction between caste and creed, between the rich and the poor and high and low. His spiritual ideas are very simplistic – mere chanting and listening to the name and qualities of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. As for example, in the first canto of *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śaṅkaradeva attracts the mind of the people through a conversation between *Vyāsa* and *Nārada*. Here *Vyāsa* informs *Nārada* that, though he is the most prolific scholar at that time and perceives *Brahma* at his slumber, yet he is not at all happy, his mind remains puzzled. He asks *Nārada* about his state of mind and asks why such sort of turbulence is upto him. *Nārada* replies in the following verses-

*mahājñānapūrṇa āmi jagate pakhyāta/  
honta samādhite brahma āpuni sāksāta//*

*tathāpi nuguce mora mane asantoṣa/  
 napāo bimariṣi kibā kari āco doṣa//  
 nārada badati śunā mahāmuni vyāsa/  
 tumise karilā sabe jagatake nāśa//  
 nirantare paśura loyāilā tumi prāṇa/  
 nāhi manda karma āra ihāra samāna//  
 ākasmite lokaka karāilā himsādharma/  
 nubujilā tumiyo vedara tattva marma//  
 garihita karmaka kahilā dharmā buli/  
 tohmāra bacane loka nāśila samūli//  
 svabhābe lampāṭa biṣayata anurāga/  
 svarga pāibo buli raṅge kāṭe haṁsa chāga//  
 karai nānā himsā dharmā nānādeva pūjai/  
 puṇya kṣaya bhaile dunāi narakata mojai//  
 yadi gñānigane tāka kare nibāraṇa/  
 āura tāra vākyaka namāne ekojane//  
 bolai upālabha kari bacana khaṇḍita/  
 vyāsato adhika bhaila ehente paṇḍita//  
 prakāṭi kahilā tumi ānase dharmaka/  
 nakailā prakhyāta kari kṛṣṇa kīrttanaka//  
 sijila tohmāta ṛṣi parama anāya/  
 nāhi sustha cittva tava sehi abhiprāya.//<sup>64</sup>*

It means- suffering from mental agony, Vyāsadeva expressed his irritation before Nārada saying- he is the treasure house of all knowledge, he can see and contact God directly and he is an incarnation of Viṣṇu also. But inspite of having such a hold over the various fields of knowledge and inspite of being endowed with such qualities, he does not have a peaceful state of mind. He asked Nārada about the reason behind such

<sup>64</sup> Barua, Harinarayan, Dutta.(2011).Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa(ed) (Sutar osarat Śaunakādi ṛsir prāthāna).Vv. 30-36.

chaotic mental condition. *Nārada* replied that by composing the *Mahābhārata*, he distracted the mind of the people from actual *dharma*. People have done illicit acts in the name of God and blame him. The religious aims have been diverted by the people according to their own will and they disgrace your name. Hence you are in a state of unhappiness.

The spiritual thoughts of Śaṅkaradeva for social reconstruction are found in the following writings also-

*kariba saḥṛda haribhakata sahite/  
brkṣa paśupakṣiko arcciba yathocite//  
tāto kari sādariḥa maṇuṣya jātika/  
dharmaśila janaka arcciba tatodhika/  
yiṭo mahābhaktara kṛṣṇese ātmāprāṇa/  
dharmaisṭhato adhika karibe bahumāna/<sup>65</sup>*

It means- An actual *bhakta*, worships the living beings and the tree, stone, herb, etc with affection. God directs the human being to love his fellowmen, who are well-versed and realizes the good or bad, etc and God blesses such *bhaktas* by giving good positions. This Eco-centric view is very progressive philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva. Through his religious teachings, he tried to make people realise that everything within this universe is equal. Whether it is a tree, herb or a stone it is sensitive, living entity and is worthy to be respected. At the time of Śaṅkaradeva, nature and natural resources were used for human enjoyment. Nobody thought about equality of natural resources or their rights. In such a situation, calling for the worship of a tree undoubtedly stands for the progressive, reformatory outlook of Śaṅkaradeva.

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<sup>65</sup> *Nimi-nava –siddha- samvāda*, v.152-153

Again, Śaṅkaradeva's thoughts on the spiritual values of society are also reflected in one of his important literary works *Bhakti-ratnākara*. The chapters of the aforementioned treatise -, *Śrīkr̥ṣṇagunākarmaṇāmnām*, and *Śravaṇamāhātmyam*, bear representative statements -

*sā śraddhyā bhagavaddharmacaryayā*

*jijñāsayādhyātmikayogaṇiṣṭhayā/*

*yogeśvaropāsanayā ca nityam*

*pūṇyśravaḥ kathayā pūṇyayā ca/*<sup>66</sup>

In order to achieve the firm attachment (to the *Ātman* and the *Brahman*), one is to perform the duties of the Lord with reverence. Attempts may be made to gain proper knowledge, efforts may be made for spiritual attainments and worship of the Lord of *yoga*, finding, and one has to listen to the celebration of the deeds of the Lord.

In the same literary work, Śaṅkaradeva again writes-

*artharāmastanniṣṭhāstāmasā indriyārāmāḥ kāmaniṣṭhā rājasāḥ taiḥ saha yā goṣṭhi  
tatrātr̥ṣṇayā/ teṣāmeva sammatānām (dhanastayādinām) aprariGRAHENĀDRATYĀGENA/  
viviktaṁ ūtaṁ vijanaṁ janaśunyasthānam, tatra rūcyā ekāntavāsanetyarthaḥ/ ātmani  
paritoṣe ca sati kintu harerguṇā eva piyuṣamamṛtaṁ tasya pānādvina/ guṇāmṛtapāne  
bhāvye viviktarucirna kāryā/ na cātmaparitoṣe' pītyāsayah/*<sup>67</sup>

Pleasure in money, attachment to that, this is *tāmasa* (corresponds to the quality '*tamaḥ*'), pleasure of the senses, attachment to desire, this is '*rājasa*' (corresponds to the quality *rajaḥ*), this the group, there (is to be) the detachment

<sup>66</sup> Goswami, Kumar.Ashok.(2017). *The Bhaktiratnākara of Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva* (Sanskrit to English).Das, Kailash & Kalita, Ch.Jagat.(Ed.) v.36. p.78.

<sup>67</sup> Goswami, Kumar.Ashok.op.cit.v.37, Pp.79-80.

'*teṣāmeva sammatānām*'(tying with the said group) - money, giving up a fascination for all these, with exclusive desire for solitude, a place without people, there being in happiness in one's own self, but the glory of *Hari* is the nectar, by drinking etc, of the same, while relishing the nectar in the form of qualities (of *Hari*) the interest for secluded place not to be there, not even the happiness of the self, this is the idea.

However, in spiritual fields, the classification of *bhakata* (devotees) by Śaṅkaradeva has been found of a great spiritual value. In his literary works i.e. *Bhakti-ratnākara and Nimi-nava-siddha-samvāda*, Śaṅkaradeva classifies the *bhakata* or the devotee into three categories. He then also analyzes the required virtues of *bhaktas*. These three *bhaktas* are –*Uttama, Madhyama, and Prākṛta*. It is mentioned by Śaṅkaradeva in the following verses-

*īśvarata dekhe yītu samaste prāñīka/  
prāñī samastato dekhe īśvara mūrtika//  
samastea īśvarya byāpi āche jagatata/  
hena yītu dekhe siṭo mahābhāgavata//  
ekānte karaya prema yītu īśvarata/  
mitratā ācare hari bhakata savata//  
ajñaka karuṇā kṣamā kare bipakṣata/  
sehijana jāñibā madhyama bhāgavata//  
nupūje bhaktaka mānya nakare prāñīka/  
eke pratimāta mātra ārādhe harika//  
sehijana jāñibāhā prākṛta bhakata/  
āruḍha haiyāche teho bhaktira pathata.//<sup>68</sup>*

He, who discovers God in the creatures of the world and realizes that the God is omnipresent; he never becomes jealous of anybody and loves all. God acknowledges

<sup>68</sup> *Nimi-nava-siddha- samvāda*, Vv.80-82

such person as *Bhāgavatabhakta*-, who helps the downtrodden get rid of their bad habits. An actual *bhaktas* always love God as well as other living beings.

Again he writes –

*nakare āpuna para bhuddhi dhana bitte/  
samastare eke ātmā jāne yiṭo citte//  
sakalo lokata sama bhāva nirupama/  
cinibā nṛpati siṭo bhakata uttama//<sup>69</sup>*

It means- That one is the real devotee or *Bhakta* who does not discriminate people on the basis of intellect or economic condition and who considers everyone in this world of equal worth. A real devotee nurtures respectful equality to all human beings .It again reflects how the saint insisted on the inculcation of the feelings of equality and brotherhood. Like a true social reformer, he always dreamt of a classless society and tried to spread this message through his works.

This classification of devotees was also supported by Mādhavdeva in his thoughts and he classified the devotees again into four divisions, according to their own behaviour and might be signified easily. It is described in the following verses of *Nām-ghoṣā* –

*adhame kevale doṣa      lavaya madhyame guṇa  
doṣa lave kariyā bicāra/  
uttame kevale guṇa      lavaya uttamottame  
alpaguṇa karaya bistāra./<sup>70</sup>*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, v.91

<sup>70</sup> Mādhavdeva, *Nām-ghoṣā*, v.120

The vicious person always looks into the viles of the person; the middle class person accepts the persons by judging good and bad behaviour, The good person always puts importance at the good qualities of a person, he never finds the dark side, but the best person is that who multiples a few good qualities or good things into abundance. It is nothing but an echo of the teachings of his master who called for inculcating the quality to acknowledge the best in human beings and to utilise them for the benefit of the society.

*Ahimsā* or non-violence is another important spiritual value in the spiritual philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva. Through *Ahimsā*, Śaṅkaradeva wanted to reconstruct the society, where all beings were respected and viewed with an equal grandeur. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva and his spiritual philosophy did not support the killing of innocent animals nor supported the animal sacrifices. To stop the killing of all creatures, he urged in the following manner-

*yata jīva jaṁgama kīṭa pataṁgama/  
aga naga jaga teri kāyā*<sup>71</sup>

It means, all the creatures, movable or immovable, are the particles of yours – the Supreme Power.

The advocacy for non-violent activities of Śaṅkaradeva was rightly echoed in the *Guru Carit Kathā*, where Mādhavadeva appreciated the non-violence activities of Śaṅkaradeva and composed the following verse-

*jñānaśūnya āti: paśu pakṣī jāti e/  
tāko anugraha kari āchā kṛpāmaya*<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Śaṅkaradeva, *Borgīta(Lyrics)*,no-04

<sup>72</sup> Neog, Maheswar (Ed.) (2012). *Guru-Carita –Kathā*, p-250 & Mādhavadeva, *Nāma-ghoṣā*,v. 804

Practically, the spiritual philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva is based upon the principles of equality and love towards all creatures. Even his philosophy appealed for putting an end to the killing of insects. Śaṅkaradeva wrote-

*dāha maha masi joka poka paruāra/  
īśvare nirmile briti rudhibe āhāra//  
piyānte gāyara teja tāka yiṭo māre/  
pare siṭo nara andhakūpa andhakāre.//<sup>73</sup>*

It means- Insects are those who survive by sucking the blood of man i.e. mosquito, wild fly and leeches, etc. and they should not be killed. The man who kills them, they are sinners and an inhabitants of the dark world.

Thus, Śaṅkaradeva through his spiritual philosophy laid down the goals, principles, and procedures for uplifting the human society through religion. Śaṅkaradeva in his spiritual philosophy never believed in caste and discrimination. He believed that there can be no rule or regulation to take *Hari -Nāma* or the name of God. Therefore, the most important message of Śaṅkaradeva was chanting the virtues of *Kṛṣṇa*. Again, he believed that listening, chanting, memorizing, offering, kneeling under the feet of God, acting as a slave, friendship, worship, and surrendering the self to God were the best ways to worship Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. Urging the need of equality for all in the society, he said-

*viṣṇura guṇa nāma alaṅkṛta/  
antyaajo yibā kari āchai gīta//  
tāka nindā kare yiṭo kumati/  
punyaka nāsi yāibe adhogati.//<sup>74</sup>*

<sup>73</sup> Barua, Harinarayan Dutta.(2011). *Bhāgavata*,Book.VI. v. 6/5286.

<sup>74</sup> *Kīrttana-ghoṣā, Pāsaṅga-marddana*, v. 89

It means-Even, when an outcaste chants *Viṣṇu*'s hymn, embellished with his virtues and *Nāma*, the evil-minded one who decries his acts is sure to be doomed along with his virtues wasted.

Thus, from the above discussion, it is clear that Śaṅkaradeva's spiritual philosophy provided new vision and a more democratic space for the people. He dreamt of a society where sustainability, equal sharing of nature's resources, to live non-violence, freedom from fear, religio-social oppression, caste based alienation do not exist. It will be a society full of spiritual harmony and peace. His philosophy of spirituality synthesized the material, spiritual, individual and collective aspects of life, where there is no conflict between society's material interest and the fundamentals of morality. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva's spiritual philosophy of social reconstruction is a blueprint for the healthy development of a human society based on ethical and spiritual values, freedom and universality.

#### **4.7.3: Human Right Education:**

Theoretically, Human Rights Education promotes values, beliefs, and attitudes that encourage all individuals to uphold their rights. It develops an understanding of everyone's common responsibility in each community. The ultimate goal of human rights education is to form attitudes and provide knowledge, which leads to good practices of human rights for all. The United Nation for Human Rights Education- UNHRE (1995-2004) has defined that human right education as training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skill and the moulding of attitude, which are directed to the strengthening of respect for human rights and

fundamental freedom, the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and the promotion of understanding, respect of gender equality.

Śaṅkaradeva, as a follower of human rights education, ‘addressed the entire humanity in his writings. He called upon the entire humanity to worship of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* or *Hari*’<sup>75</sup>. Śaṅkaradeva’s messages of human rights education is reflected in the following verses-

*parara dharmaka nihimsibā kadācita/  
karibā bhūtaka dāyā sakaruṇa citta//*<sup>76</sup>

It means- never nurture hatred towards other religions. Be kind to all creatures with a pious heart.

*sakala prāṇīka dekhībeka ātma sama/  
upāya madhyata iṭo āti mukhyatama.//*<sup>77</sup>

Here he appeals to all to dignify all creatures as good as of equal status and it is the best of all means of one’s worship.

*śatru mitra sava kariyo sama/  
ehise kṛṣṇara bhakti uttama.//*<sup>78</sup>

It means equal treatment for friends and foes and it is the best way of devotion towards *Kṛṣṇa*.

*samaste bhūtate vyāpi ācho mai hari/  
savāko mānibā tumi viṣṇubuddhi kari//*<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Borkakati, Sanjib Kr. (2015). *Srimanta Sankaradeva*. p. 157

<sup>76</sup> *Bhakti- pradīpa*, v.140-41

<sup>77</sup> *Kīrtana-ghoṣā, Śrī Kṛṣṇara vaikuntha prayāna*, v.1825

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid, Prahlāda carita*, v.392

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid, Śrī Kṛṣṇara vaikuntha prayāna*, v.1820

God exists everywhere in the universe and so everything of this visual world should be treated as divine and of spiritual reverence.

Śaṅkaradeva was vocal against killing animals either for the purpose of consumption or for the purpose of sacrificing before gods and goddesses. He says-

*nāmāribe paśuka eḍibe mām̐sa āśā/  
devako uddeśi paśu nakaribā himsā//  
dāmbhika saḥhata nakahibā ito tattva/  
sadā upadeśa dibā vaiṣṇava janata//  
strīśūdro karai yadi āmāta bhakati/  
tāhāta kahibā iṭo jñāna mahāmati.//<sup>80</sup>*

Through these lines he calls for putting an end to the practice of killing animals, whether for material consumption or for sacrificial rites. Disseminating this knowledge is what a real devotee should do.

*yito mahā mleccha jāti siyo śuddha hovai āti  
mukhe mātra harināma laya/  
kalira bhayata gaiyā nāmata śaraṇa laiṅyā  
rahila samasta dharmmacaya.//<sup>81</sup>*

Purification of the soul or the spiritual status does not need any ritual. Even the Mleccha – the dirtiest and the lowest of the social strata can purify their state just by taking recourse to the help of *Hari-nāma* –the rendering of the virtues and activities of God. Here we find how common mass were repeatedly taught about the importance of

<sup>80</sup> *Kīrtana -ghoṣa, Śrī Kṛṣṇara vaikuntha prayāna*, v.1826

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid, Bhāgavata-tātparyya*, v.2019

pure , selfless devotion and how it can upgrade his /her the mental and spiritual state of affairs.

*brāhamaṇara cāṇḍālara nibicāri kula/*

*dātāta corata yena dr̥ṣṭi ekatula//*

*nīcata sād̥huta yāra ekajñāna/*

*tāhākese paṇḍita buliya sarvvajana//<sup>82</sup>*

It means- having no caste -discrimination between *Brāhmaṇa* and *Cāṇḍāla* and giving the same attention to donors and thieves. Again, same regards for the pious and the mean, if a person lives this way, he is called wise by all men.

The above-mentioned verses prove that as a humanitarian and follower of human rights education, Śaṅkaradeva had a vision for the establishment of an egalitarian society. During his lifetime, Śaṅkaradeva was very much concerned about the problems of the contemporary society and tried to investigate the real value of human beings. Thus, Śaṅkaradeva as a social reformer and human rights worker raised his voice against the social evils and paved the way for a new society with the message of faith in fraternity, equality, liberty and social justice through *Kṛṣṇa bhakti*.

#### **4.7.4: Religion and Religious Activities-*Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma:***

Etymologically, religion means a bond, which unites the human life as well as social life. ‘There are two broad forms of religion. These are individuals and the other social. In the individual form, religion means solitariness, which makes silent efforts to establish communion with the divine and by social form of religion, it means several people forming one religious group by virtue of entertaining more or less, the same set

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid, Śrī Kṛṣṇara-vaikunṭha prayāna, v.1821*

of spiritual convictions and observing more or less the same kind of religious practices either individually or congregationally.’<sup>83</sup>

In ancient India, through religious scriptures, the scholars realized the meaning of religion and distinguished between men and animals according to their behaviour and activities. For example, to explain the etymology of religion the commentator Medhātithi says-

*dhīyate iti dharmah/*

*dhāraṇāt dharmma ityāhuḥ/*<sup>84</sup>

The meaning of the above dictum is that – keeping hold is *dharmma*; that which can keep together is called *dharmma* and this *dharmma* keeps together or holds together the human being. *Dharma* is a catalytic agent which helps people to live together, act together, make them realise the vanity and vain, happiness and sorrow of one another. *Dharma* can illuminate the dark corners of man and leads one to attain the status of a pious soul.

Again, according to *Dharmaśāstra*–*dharmma* (religion) is not a creed but a mode of life or a code of conduct, which regulates an individual’s work and activities as a member of the collective society. In simple words, the religion is the love of truth and beauty and developing beliefs in the brotherhood of man and an attitude to serve the society. It is not a passion for abstract devotion.

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<sup>83</sup> Tiwari, K.N.(2012). *Comparative, Religion*. Introduction.

<sup>84</sup> *Manusmṛti Medhātithi Manubhāṣya*, Discourse II-Sources of Knowledge, Section II- Dharma Defined, Translated by Ganganath Jha, Wisdom Library since800BC, cited in <https://www.Wisdomlib.org>book>man, 1920, v.2.1>>accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> August/2018.

Śaṅkaradeva through religion brought about a change in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese people. Śaṅkaradeva propounded *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*, a religion based on *bhakti* or devotion or supreme surrender to one God *Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa*. This *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*, initiated by Śaṅkaradeva is a very simple religion. It was a religion, free from rituals, sacrifices, and superstitions and strictly based on *bhakti* or devotion which emphasizes the unity of Godhead. Śaṅkaradeva through this religion developed the idea the master –servant relationship in the form of the devotees and the Supreme Power. He believed that it is the only possible way for complete realization of God. This idea is found in the *Śrīmadbhagavatgītā*, in the following manner-

*tasmāt sarveṣu kāleṣu māmanusmara yudhyaca/  
mayarpita manobudhirmāmevaiṣya saṁśayaḥ*<sup>85</sup>

These lines request to fix one’s mind, heart and intellect on the God and thereby the devotee will find God in him.

The *Bhagavadgīta* says:

*teṣāmaham samuddhartā mṛtyu saṁsāra sāgarāt/  
bhavāmi na cirāt pārtha mayyāveśitacetasām*<sup>86</sup>

Here Lord *Kṛṣṇa* advice *Arjuna* ‘Give up all faiths and only surrender yourself before me. You should not waste time on the thoughts of sins. Once you impose faith on me I would take care of your problems. You should take refuge in me for your ultimate successes’.

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<sup>85</sup> *Śrīmad Bhagavatgītā*, Chapter 8/7

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*,Chapter 12/7

Śaṅkaradeva believed that the *bhakti* in the true sense of the term implies purity of mind, body and spirit of the devotee. He believed that a person with the true *bhakti* in God will be physically, mentally and spiritually free from all sorts of desire. Thus, according to him, sincere *bhakti* to God demands that the devotee must be morally good with all human values and should uphold the virtues like honesty, justice and equality.

Śaṅkaradeva believed that *Nāma* has great transformative power, which can lead one to the omnipresent God. To support Śaṅkaradeva's thought, Mādhavdeva, the chief disciple of Śaṅkaradeva, wrote the following verse-

*harira nāmara ananta mahimā*  
*jāni mahājane gānta/*  
*āpuna nāmara mahimāka hari*  
*āpuni anta napānta./*<sup>87</sup>

It means- the honest people chant the name of God by knowing his *bibhūti*s and even God himself does not know the eternal power of his name.

Hence, Śaṅkaradeva believed that the *Yajñas* (Sacrifices) fasting, worshipping of other gods and meditation are meaningless. But to praise the name of *Kṛṣṇa* or chanting His names and virtues is the easiest way to attain salvation. He calls for acquiring that power when one is able to go beyond the dominance of material and sensual forces like *Kāma*, *Krodha*, *Lobha* and *Moha*, which are present in all human beings. These are the ones that ruin the dignity of lives. One can overcome these effects only by surrendering to the feet of God selflessly. Thus, the *Eka Śaraṇa Hari*

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<sup>87</sup> Mādhavdeva, *Nām-ghoṣā*, v.338

*Nāma Dharma* initiated by Śaṅkaradeva was a practical religion and demanded that a man should live a life of value rather than a life of mere faith or belief. As a religion, it always puts prior importance to human life and the urgency of performance of good deeds.

#### **4.7.5: Religious Tolerance:**

Religious tolerance means allowing other people to think or practice religions and beliefs without any pressure or imposition, which ‘recognized and respect other beliefs and practices etc without sharing them and to bear or put up with some or something not especially liked’<sup>88</sup>. Thus, ‘religious tolerance was a completely humble and gentle, be patient bearing with one another in love and be kind and compassionate to one another and forgiving each other’<sup>89</sup>. In Indian philosophy, according to Acarya Dharmakīrti, religious tolerance means -

*dharmā so bādhathe dharmā: na dharmā kodharmā tata/*

*avirodhi tu so dharmā: sa dharmā satya biccrama./*<sup>90</sup>

It means- good and tolerant religion is one; that does not get envious of the other's existence. The *dharmā*, that is intolerable against other religion is a bad religion, tolerant religion survives long.

This concept and ideology of religious tolerance is perfectly suited for the social reconstructive philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards

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<sup>88</sup> Webster dictionary (2013)

<sup>89</sup> Ephesians: 4.32, *The Holy Bible*, Crossway Bibles a publishing Ministry of Good News Publisher: www.bible gate .com, 2001>accessed on 18/4//2017

<sup>90</sup> Acarya Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇavārttika*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter) Advanced Buddhist philosophy, Institute of Buddhist Dialectics: Mclead Ganj, Dharmasala, India, 2016.

religious sects was quite tolerant. Śaṅkaradeva unequivocally said that one should not exhibit any hostility to the other religion. These teachings of Śaṅkaradeva are reflected in his literary works *Bhakti-pradīpa* and *Bhakti Ratnākara*. In *Bhakti pradīpa*, he writes-

*parara dharmaka nihiṁsibā kadācita/  
karibā bhūtataka dāyā sakaruṇa cita//  
huiba śānta cittā sarvva dharmata batsala/  
ehi bhāgavata dharma jānā mahābāla./<sup>91</sup>*

It means ‘never do any harm to other religions, be merciful to all beings, be compassionate to all sects, O, *Mahābala* this is the religion of *Bhāgavata*’.

Śaṅkaradeva’s thoughts on religious tolerance are also found in the following verse of *Nimi-nava-siddha-samvāda*, where he says-

*bhāgavata śāstre śraddhā karibā nitānta/  
nakaribā nindā āna śāstrako ekānta./<sup>92</sup>*

It means- As a devotee, you should have reverence to *Bhāgavata*. But should not show contempt to other scriptures.

These examples prove that Śaṅkaradeva's thoughts on religious tolerance is a means for social upheaval and he exerts his efforts with the belief that end determines the means.

#### **4.7.6: Caste Upliftment and Equality for All:**

‘A caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a style of life, which often includes an occupation; rituals

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<sup>91</sup> *Bhakti pradīpa*, Vv. 141

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*,v.145

status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction.’<sup>93</sup> The Neo-vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva has brought historical changes in all fields –religious, social-cultural and literary. Unlike the other religions, Neo-vaiṣṇavism was not a religion of ritualistic and formal activities. Rather it was more inspired by the ideals of reformation and reconstruction by developing artistic qualities and eradicating social evils. ‘It abhorred *Raja* and *Tamagaṇas* (virtues) and preached *Sattvagaṇas*-the qualities of goodness like humanity, compliance, restraint, benevolence and above all non- violence.’<sup>94</sup> While working for equality, Śaṅkaradeva took specific initiatives to demolish the evils of caste division.

Hence, Śaṅkaradeva through this movement preached equality for all human beings. The following verses are representative statements of Śaṅkaradeva in this regard-

*brāhmaṇara cāṇḍālara nibicāri kula/  
dātāta corata yena dṛṣṭi ekatula//  
nīcata sādḥuta yāra bhaila ekajñāna/  
tāhākese paṇḍita buliya sarvvajana//*<sup>95</sup>

It means, a real scholar is a man with a mind having no discrimination between *Brāhmaṇa* and *Cāṇḍāla* putting equal attention to donors and thieves, carrying same regards for the pious and the mean. If a person lives this way, he is called wise by all men. This specific reference to *Brāhmaṇa* and *Cāṇḍāla* stands for the existing pattern

<sup>93</sup> Rao, C.N.Shankar.(1990). *Sociology-Primary Principles of Sociology with an Introduction to Social Thought*. p-290.

<sup>94</sup> Barman, Sivanath.(2013).*Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p-31

<sup>95</sup> *Kīrtana-ghoṣā, Śrī Kṛṣṇara vaikunṭha prayāṇa*, v.1821

of the caste division and how the upper caste people used to discriminate the lower ones in different aspects. So Śaṅkaradeva tried to propound the view that real wisdom lies in developing equal attitude towards everyone. Śaṅkaradeva dreamt of a casteless society which has been reflected in such literary compositions.

Again he writes-

*sakala prāṇīka dekhibeka ātmasama/  
upāya madhyata iṭo āti mukhyatama.*<sup>96</sup>

It means, to see all creatures as good as oneself the best of all means of one's worship.

This philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva, on equality and upliftment of the people caste prejudices, was supported by his chief disciple Mādhavadeva as follows-

*gāro bhoṭa yavane harira nāma laya/  
henaya nāmaka kene sajjane nindaya.*<sup>97</sup>

It means- even the *Gāros*, the *Bhūtiyās* and *Yavanas* chant the name of *Hari* or God. These three words stand for three different communities which were considered to be lower, "other" in the contemporary Assamese society. But, according to Mādhavadeva, chanting the names of God does not follow any caste based boundary and it is practised by all.

Again, he writes-

*hari nāme nāhike niyama adhikārī/  
rāma buli tare miri asama kachārī.*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, v.1825

<sup>97</sup> Mādhavadeva, *Nām-ghoṣā*, v.482

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, v.510

It means the Miris, the Āhoms, and the Kachāris attain salvation through chanting *Nāma* of Lord *Rāma*

The thought of caste upliftment of Śaṅkaradeva is also found in the writings of hagiographer Ramānanda Dvija. Dvija mentions that the contemporary *Kāmarūpa* was a *Mleccha* country and *Kṛṣṇa* has incarnated here in the guise of Śaṅkaradeva. Even the *Mlecchas* now perform *Nāma kīrtana* and easily attain *Vaikuṅṭha*.(v.1147).

Thus, Śaṅkaradeva in his religion did not make any distinction among the people of various castes and creeds; the door was open to everyone. Therefore, his religious process succeeded to unite different ethnic groups. For example, among his disciples, Govinda was a Garo, Joyram a Bhūtiyā, Chāndasai a Muslim, Paramānanda a Mising, Narahari an Āhom, Murāri, and Chilārāi were Kochs. Here each of the disciples took initiation at his feet. Above these, it is seen that his religion influenced later ‘a large number of plain tribes like the Kochs, Kachāris, Rābhās, Chūtiyas, Misings, Āhoms, Maṭaks, and Morāns etc are brought into the Vaiṣṇava fold by the Mahanta's of different Sattras.’<sup>99</sup> Thus, Śaṅkaradevabelieved that ‘the path of spiritual realization cannot be the exclusive right of a socially privileged few, rather it should be the duty of those socially privilege to bring their brethren of the lower stratum to the path of spiritual realization.’<sup>100</sup>

Again, Śaṅkaradeva in his thoughts had deep sympathy for the common man and tried to redeem him from the clutches of the caste system. He thus pinned his faith

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<sup>99</sup> Barman,Sivanath.(2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*, p-420

<sup>100</sup> Sharma, Satyandra Nath.(1966). *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, p. 43.

more on the so-called low- caste people. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Canto of *Bhāgavata*, Śaṅkaradeva wrote-

*brāmaṇa kṣatriya vaiśya iṭo tini jāti/  
nuśunibe hari bhakatika kāṇa pāti//  
śūdrasava aneka kaivarta ādi kari/  
antyaja paryanta bhajibeka mahāhari//  
aprayāse labhiba īśvara mahājñāna/  
eteke kalita śūdra kaivarta pradhāna/<sup>101</sup>*

It means, the *Brāhmins*, the *Kṣatriyas* and the *Vaiśyas* will not listen to matters concerning *Hari bhakti*. The great *Hari* (God) would be adored by the *Śūdras*, *Kaivartas*, and the outcaste and thereby they would realize God without effort. Hence, in the *Kali* (age) it will be *Śūdras* and the *Kaivartas* who will take the lead.

The aforementioned references prove that ‘Śaṅkaradeva had all the sympathy for the lower caste. He never ventured to do away with the caste –system altogether. He simply tried to loosen its grip over the masses.’<sup>102</sup> Simply, Śaṅkaradeva had a vision of a society where all men would be equal and he realized that there needed a radical change in the entire socio-economic structure of the society. Therefore, he never put any norms or any criterion to follow his religion. It was open to all irrespective of caste, community and gender. Śaṅkaradeva believed that to establish

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<sup>101</sup> *Bhāgavata*, Book XII, Vv.110-111

<sup>102</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2017). *Srimanta Sankaradeva: His Multidimensional Contribution* (Keynote Address)International Seminer, 23rd -25<sup>th</sup> February. MSSV. Nagaon.

equality for all there was only one way that is chanting of and listening to Lord *Kṛṣṇa*.

He wrote-

*kṛṣṇara kathāta yīto rasika/  
brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāgai kika//  
smaroka mātra hari dine rāti/  
nabāchai bhakati jāti ajāti.//<sup>103</sup>*

It means if a person has a deep interest in *Kṛṣṇa-kathā*, he need not be a *Brāhmaṇa* by birth. Let him only recall Lord day and night because devotion in the pure sense makes no distinction between castes.

Again, he wrote-

*ekānte marai karma mātra kari/  
hṛdaye thākiya vidūra hari//  
śravaṇa kīrttana yāra abhyāsa/  
nachāḍanta hari tāhāra pāśa//<sup>104</sup>*

It means- he solely gets doomed pursuing other rites, as the *Hari* in his heart leaves him at the far-off site. If *Śravaṇa-kīrttana* becomes a person's habit, the *Hari* stays with him at every moment.

Thus, Śāṅkaradeva's philosophy always advocated for the upliftment of the society by eradicating the evils of. He prescribed the upliftment of every human being irrespective of their caste and so repeatedly insisted that pure devotion does not follow any caste distinction. For the Almighty, one's only identity is as a devotee, not as someone belonging to a lower or upper caste. He opened his religion for everyone, whether it might be *Brāhmiṇ* or a *Gāro*, *Kāyaśtha* or a *Kachārī*.

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<sup>103</sup> *Kīrttana-ghoṣā, Pāṣaṇḍa-mardana*, v.129

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, v.133

#### 4.7.7: Gender Equality:

Gender equality refers to the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision making .Both men and women should enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all levels and all situations in the society. The concept of equality of men and women flows from the idea that all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, and prejudices. Gender equality means that a person's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities would not be influenced by whether they are born male and female. Thus, 'gender equality means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs, which include equal treatment or treatment that is different but it is considered equivalent in terms of right, benefits, obligations and opportunities.'<sup>105</sup> It is not only a fundamental human right, but a very important foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. It has been the burning topic in the recent times.

The philosophical thought of Śaṅkaradeva on gender equality has been found in one of his important literary works called *Anādīpātana*. In this work, he discusses in detail the theory of evolution. This theory of evolution is inspired by Sāṅkhya philosophy. According to Sāṅkhya philosophy, *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are two independent realities and *Puruṣa* is inactive and *Prakṛti* was active but blind. However, in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy, *Puruṣa* or the God produces *Prakṛti* from himself and *Prakṛti* is not an independent entity. He describes *Prakṛti* as the energy or

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<sup>105</sup> *International Labour Organization Report: United Nation, 2000, p.48*

free will of God. It means *Prakṛti* has no separate existence. After creation or at the time of dissolution *Prakṛti* gets merged in God. Śaṅkaradeva writes-

*māyāra hātata karāo jagata prakāśa/  
karo ṣṛṣṭi līlā āve vinoda bilāsa.//*<sup>106</sup>

Again, he writes-

*ṣṛṣṭi karibāka iśvarara ichā kāya/  
puruṣara parā mahāmāyā bhailā bāja//  
anādi rūpiṇī iśvarara arddha kāya/  
vyakṭa bhailā mahāmāyā ṣṛṣṭika upāya.//*<sup>107</sup>

It means- When God wished to create, the great *Mahāmāyā* came out who emerged as the half of the physical body of the God. Thus the great *Māyā* got expressed for the sake of creation.

Śaṅkaradeva narrates what happened after *Prakṛti* was produced from *Puruṣa-*

*śuniyo prakṛti ekoguṇe nohā hīna/  
tohmāre āhmāre kiñciteko nāhi bhina//  
mora nija śakati sākṣāte dekho prāṇa/  
satvare kariyo māyā jagata nirmāṇa//  
tohmāka jagāilo āmi ehi abhiprāya/  
jāniyoka bhāle tumi mora arddha kāya//  
tohmāre āhmāre kicho nāhi bhinnābhinna/  
mote yāto līna yāhā ehi mātra hīna.//*<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> *Anādi-pātana*, v. 43

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, v. 45

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, Vv. 49-50 & *Bhāgavata* -4<sup>th</sup> Canto

Here *Puruṣa* says to *Prakṛti*- Lisen, O *Prakṛti*, you are not deficient in any quality. There is no difference at all between you and me. In essence, you possess my energy and lifeforce. So O *Māyā*, with this intention, I built the world and aroused you. You know well that you are my half body (*Ardhya-kāyā*). There is no difference of identity between you and me. You get absorbed in me. This is the only deficiency in you.

The above -cited extracts are taken from *Anādipātana* which clearly indicate the philosophical concept of gender equality in the processes of evolution between the *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* or God. Thus, 'Śaṅkaradeva in his many writings eulogized diverged qualities of women and vouched for an independent female identity. His attitude towards women and gender justice was not condemnation but that of condescension'.<sup>109</sup> For example, Śaṅkaradeva himself lived an ideal householder's life with his wife and children. He did not think marriage to be a hindrance upon the path of devotion. Therefore, he advised his chief disciple Mādhavdeva also for marriage. In the *Kathā Guru Carit*, it is mentioned in the following line:

*bole barār powā, gaḍ bāndhi yujile saj, prāṇor saṁśay nāi, binā gaḍe jujile bhay*<sup>110</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva fought for equal rights of women. In his work *Rāmāyaṇa Uttarākāṇḍa*, he mentioned that when there had been injustice with *Sītā*, she protested against Lord *Rāma* accusing him of injustice. It is found in the following verses of *Uttarākāṇḍa* of Śaṅkaradeva, where he wrote-

<sup>109</sup> Barman, Sivanath. (2013). *Tradition to Modernity-Essay on Assam*. p-70.

<sup>110</sup> Lekharu, Upendra Ch.(2011). *Katha Guru Carit*Pp. 54-55.

*duṣṭe dile apayaśa tâte āna trāsa/  
chale niyā diyāilanta āmāka nirbbāsa//  
dekhā dekhā iṭo kene svāmīra maryādā/  
kisaka karile etamāna chalabāda //*<sup>111</sup>

It means- Instigated by the ill-words uttered by the culprit, this so-called *Maryādyā Puruṣottama Rāma* placed me in exile. Is it the quality of a husband to dishonour the dignity of his wife?

Again, Śaṅkaradeva writes-

*save bole enuvā rāmaka bhāla bhāla/  
maito jāno mora rānese yamakāla//*<sup>112</sup>

It means- People praise *Rāma* as a good and honest man but for me, *Rāma* is none other than *Yama* or the god of death. It indirectly stands for Sītā's dissatisfaction born out of the lack of honour towards the women. Thus Śaṅkaradeva sowed the seeds of feminist philosophy even in such a remote period of time.

Regarding women's equality, Śaṅkaradeva was surprisingly progressive and revolted against those people who tortured women. In his literary work *Hariścandra-upākhyāna*, he writes against these people in the following manner –

*strīka durbala kare konano niskhale/  
jvalanta bahnika bāndhe bastrara añcale.*<sup>113</sup>

It means- the person who weakens women, wraps the burning fire by end of a sheet of cloth. It symbolically exposes the patriarchal tradition of Indian Society and shows how women and their potentiality are dominated by the male folk.

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<sup>111</sup> *RāmāyaṇaUttarākāṇḍa*, v.365

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, v.367

<sup>113</sup> *Hariścandra-upākhyāna*, v.75

In the same literary work, Śaṅkaradeva recognized the strength of women -

*keli kautuhale āchilihi mora pāśa/  
krīḍāta karilo tāka jīvā parihāsa//  
yena bhaila raṅgara samaya mana rośa/  
ehi tota sādho tāta nadharibi dośa.//<sup>114</sup>*

It means, you were beside me in enjoyment, please forgive me for whatever derogatory comments, I made to you upset during the time of frolic.

In favour of gender equality, he considered women as complimentary partners of men in every purpose of life and wrote-

*karmma samayata toka mantrī buli lekhi/  
raṅgara belāta yena tai prāṅsakhī.//<sup>115</sup>*

It means, you were my bosom friend during the time of enjoyment and I treated you like my minister during the time of work.

Other literary works like *Rukmiṇīharaṇa-nāṭa* (play), *Rukmiṇī Haraṇa Kāvya*, *Pārijātaharaṇa-Nāṭa* (play), *Patnīpasāda* and *Keliogopāla-Nāṭa* (play) also bear enough references where Śaṅkaradeva eulogized and revealed the independent identity of women.

From the entire analysis, it is found that Śaṅkaradeva was a social reconstructionist by heart and it was integrally associated with his religious activities. It integrates individual, his religion and reconstruction of society into one stream as the individual cannot be separated from society. Every individual is a representative of

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, v.438

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, v.436

the collective form of the society and each of them compliments another. So religion cannot be isolated set of practices practiced in a hall or a worshipping place. Rather it should be simple, minimal and should be integrated with the daily life of the individual. Neo Vaisnavism was designed on such principles. It is based on the principle of *bhakti* or devotion that all human life is one. Śaṅkaradeva believes that in a society where one man gains spirituality the whole world gains with him and failure of one leads to the fall of the whole society. Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of social reconstruction is integrated in the sense that it wanted to look into the man and the society from a new perspective of parallel development. It is capable of change and it might be changed. As soon as a man starts considering him as the servant of Lord, then purity of thought and action enter into his life. Another significant and striking feature of Śaṅkaradeva's social reconstruction philosophy is that it is based on inculcation of spirituality. Spirituality provides a way of liberalism of soul and a road for the regeneration of man with spiritual force. Śaṅkaradeva believed that it regenerated man and the emergence of social relationships based on spirituality and the spirit of renunciation.