



HUMANISTIC DIMENSIONS OF ŚAṆKARADEVA'S PHILOSOPHY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Mahāpurūṣa Śaṅkaradeva occupies a unique position in the religious, philosophical, literary and socio-cultural history of Assam. His philosophy is primarily rooted in devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa and is expressed through the doctrine of *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*, or exclusive surrender to God through devotion and the remembrance and chanting of His name. Although Śaṅkaradeva's teachings are fundamentally religious, they contain significant humanistic dimensions. His rejection of caste-based discrimination, emphasis on equality, compassion, fraternity, moral discipline and collective religious participation contributed to the transformation of Assamese society. Through *nāma-kīrtana*, *bhakti*, *śravaṇa*, *kīrtana*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiyā Nāṭ*, *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and other literary and cultural forms, he communicated spiritual ideals to ordinary people. This paper examines the humanistic elements of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy and argues that his conception of devotion was not merely a path to individual salvation but also a means of creating a morally responsible, compassionate and harmonious society.

Keywords: Śaṅkaradeva, Humanism, Bhakti, Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma, Equality, Social Reform etc.

Introduction

Humanism generally refers to a philosophical and ethical outlook that gives importance to human dignity, moral responsibility, equality, compassion and the welfare of human beings. In the Indian intellectual tradition, humanistic ideas are often expressed through concepts such as *dayā* (compassion), *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *maitrī* (friendship), *loka-saṅgraha* (welfare and preservation of society), *sarva-bhūta-hita* (welfare of all beings) and universal spiritual equality.

In the history of Assam, Śaṅkaradeva represents one of the most influential figures whose religious philosophy had a profound social and cultural impact. He was not merely a religious teacher but also a poet, dramatist, musician, social reformer and cultural organizer. His Neo-Vaiṣṇava movement provided a common religious and cultural platform for people belonging to different social groups.

The central principle of Śaṅkaradeva's religious teaching is *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*. It emphasizes exclusive devotion to Kṛṣṇa and the importance of hearing and chanting the divine name. Yet the social implications of this philosophy are equally significant. By making devotion accessible to ordinary people and emphasizing the spiritual equality of devotees, Śaṅkaradeva challenged several forms of social exclusion prevalent in his time.

Therefore, an examination of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy from the perspective of humanism reveals that his teachings combine spiritual realization with ethical and social responsibility.

Objectives of the Study

The aims and objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the concept of humanism in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy.
2. To study the humanistic dimensions of *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*.
3. To analyse Śaṅkaradeva's ideas concerning equality and social harmony.
4. To examine the role of compassion and moral values in his teachings.



5. To study the contribution of *nāma-kīrtana*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiyā Nāṭ* and *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* to the propagation of humanistic values.
6. To understand the relevance of Śaṅkaradeva's humanistic philosophy in contemporary society.

Methodology

The present study follows a descriptive, analytical and interpretative methodology. Primary sources associated with Śaṅkaradeva, particularly the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, *Guṇamālā*, *Ankiyā Nāṭ* and devotional compositions, are considered along with relevant secondary literature on Assamese Neo-Vaiṣṇavism and Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy.

The study interprets Śaṅkaradeva's teachings from the perspective of humanistic values such as equality, compassion, fraternity, moral responsibility and social harmony.

Philosophical Background of Śaṅkaradeva

Śaṅkaradeva developed a distinctive form of Vaiṣṇava devotion in Assam. His religious philosophy is commonly associated with *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma*. The fundamental principle is surrender to the Supreme Lord, particularly Kṛṣṇa, accompanied by devotion and remembrance of His name.

His religious practice gives central importance to:

- *Śravaṇa* — hearing the divine name and glories of God.
- *Kīrtana* — chanting and singing the divine name.
- *Nāma* — remembrance and repetition of God's name.
- *Bhakti* — loving devotion.
- *Śaraṇāgati* — surrender to God.
- Association with devotees and participation in communal religious practices.

Śaṅkaradeva's religious philosophy is therefore not confined to abstract metaphysical speculation. It is expressed through accessible forms of literature, music, drama and collective worship.

This accessibility is one of the major foundations of its humanistic character.

Meaning of Humanism in Śaṅkaradeva's Philosophy:

Śaṅkaradeva did not formulate a modern philosophical theory called "humanism." Therefore, his philosophy should not be artificially equated with modern secular humanism.

However, several elements of his teachings can be interpreted as humanistic because they emphasize:

- Spiritual equality,
- Dignity of ordinary people,
- Compassion,
- Social harmony,
- Moral conduct,
- Rejection of unnecessary social distinctions,
- Universal accessibility of devotion,



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- Welfare of society.

His central idea was that sincere devotion, rather than social status, wealth or external ritual, is the essential basis of spiritual life.

Thus, the humanistic significance of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy lies in its transformation of religious experience into a shared social and ethical practice.

Equality and Social Harmony

One of the most important humanistic aspects of Śaṅkaradeva's movement is its emphasis on spiritual equality.

Traditional society was characterized by various forms of social hierarchy. Śaṅkaradeva's devotional movement provided a relatively inclusive religious environment in which people from different social backgrounds could participate in *nāma-kīrtana* and congregational worship.

The *nāmaghar* became an important institution in Assamese society. It functioned not only as a religious centre but also as a space for community interaction and cultural activity.

Human Dignity and the Accessibility of Religion

Śaṅkaradeva presented religious teachings in forms that ordinary people could understand and participate in.

Instead of restricting religious knowledge to a learned elite, he used:

- Assamese language,
- Songs,
- Dramas,
- Narratives,
- Congregational singing,
- Storytelling,
- Dance and performance.

His *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* played an important role in communicating devotional teachings. Through accessible language and artistic forms, philosophical and religious ideas reached a much wider section of society.

This democratization of religious communication is an important humanistic feature of his movement.

Compassion as a Humanistic Value

Compassion occupies an important place in the ethical dimension of Bhakti. For Śaṅkaradeva, genuine devotion cannot be separated from good conduct. A person who claims to be devoted to God should cultivate humility, compassion, self-control and respect for others. Devotion therefore becomes an ethical discipline.

The humanistic implication is clear: spirituality should transform human behaviour. A religious person should become more compassionate, peaceful and morally responsible.



Thus, Śaṅkaradeva's Bhakti is not simply an emotional relationship between the individual and God; it has consequences for interpersonal relationships and social life.

Rejection of Excessive Ritualism

Another significant aspect of Śaṅkaradeva's teaching is his emphasis on simple devotional practices.

He gave prominence to: Nāma → Śravaṇa → Kīrtana → Bhakti → Śaraṇāgati, rather than making elaborate ritual practices the sole means of religious attainment.

This simplified religious practice made spiritual life more accessible to ordinary people. From a humanistic perspective, such accessibility reduces the distance between religious institutions and common people. Spiritual value is not determined simply by wealth, social position or one's ability to perform elaborate rituals.

Universalism of Bhakti : Śaṅkaradeva's devotion is fundamentally centred on the Supreme Lord. Yet his devotional community was designed to bring people together.

The *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma* promotes collective devotion through congregational singing and remembrance of God. The community of devotees becomes a space where social interaction is based more on shared devotion than on worldly distinctions. The ideal of a spiritual community therefore has an important humanistic dimension: people can overcome divisions through a shared ethical and spiritual purpose.

The Humanistic Message of Kīrtana-ghoṣā

The *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is one of Śaṅkaradeva's most important religious and literary works. It narrates episodes associated with Kṛṣṇa and Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions.

The narratives communicate values such as:

- Devotion,
- Humility,
- Truthfulness,
- Compassion,
- Surrender,
- Righteousness,
- Faith,
- Moral discipline.

The stories are not merely theological narratives. They also provide ethical models for human conduct.

Through these narratives, ordinary people could understand philosophical and moral principles in a simple and memorable manner.

Humanism in Ankiyā Nāṭ

Śaṅkaradeva's contribution to Assamese drama is another important dimension of his humanistic philosophy.



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His *Ankiyā Nāṭ* combines:

- drama,
- music,
- dance,
- dialogue,
- narration,
- devotional philosophy.

Works such as *Cihna-yātrā*, *Pārījāta-haraṇa*, *Kāli-damana*, *Kamsa-vadha*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* and *Keli-gopāla* communicate religious and ethical values through dramatic performance.

The dramatic form made philosophical teachings available to people who might not have had access to formal philosophical education. Theatre therefore became an instrument of social education.

Humanism and Borgeet

Śaṅkaradeva's *Borgeet* represents another important form through which spiritual and emotional values were expressed.

The songs communicate:

- devotion,
- humility,
- surrender,
- longing for God,
- spiritual awareness,
- detachment from worldly ego.

The aesthetic experience of music creates an emotional connection between the individual and the spiritual ideal.

In this sense, *Borgeet* contributes to the humanization of religious experience by transforming philosophical ideas into an accessible emotional and artistic form.

The Role of the Nāmaghar

The *nāmaghar* is one of the most enduring social institutions associated with Śaṅkaradeva's religious movement.

It functions as a centre of:

- prayer,
- *nāma-kīrtana*,
- cultural activities,
- community meetings,
- social interaction,
- collective decision-making.



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The nāmaghar therefore has significance beyond religion.

It creates a sense of community and encourages collective participation. The institution has played a major role in preserving Assamese cultural identity and strengthening social relationships.

Its community-oriented character is one of the strongest manifestations of the social humanism associated with Śaṅkaradeva.

Ethical Discipline and Human Character

Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy emphasizes the transformation of human character.

True devotion requires qualities such as:

- humility,
- truthfulness,
- kindness,
- self-control,
- simplicity,
- faith,
- respect for others.

The devotee should overcome ego, pride, greed and hatred.

Therefore, the ultimate objective of religious practice is not merely external religious identity but the cultivation of a morally refined personality.

This is an important humanistic principle because a healthy society depends upon individuals possessing ethical responsibility.

Śaṅkaradeva and Social Reform

Śaṅkaradeva's movement contributed to social transformation in medieval Assam. His teachings created a new form of religious community that could include people from diverse social backgrounds. His use of the vernacular helped to overcome the linguistic barriers that often separated learned religious discourse from ordinary people. His movement also created institutions and cultural practices that brought people together. Thus, his contribution can be understood at three interconnected levels viz., Spiritual reform → Ethical reform → Social reform.

Spiritual devotion transformed individual consciousness; ethical discipline transformed individual behaviour; and collective religious practice contributed to social cohesion.

Humanism and the Concept of Bhakti

The centrality of Bhakti in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy is particularly important.

Bhakti is based on a relationship between the individual devotee and the Supreme Being. Yet this relationship also influences the devotee's relationship with other human beings. A genuine devotee is expected to develop humility and compassion rather than arrogance and hatred.



Humanism and Cultural Integration

Śaṅkaradeva's contribution was not restricted to philosophy or religion. He created a broad cultural system involving literature, music, dance, theatre, painting and community institutions. This cultural integration enabled philosophical and moral values to become part of everyday life. The humanistic value of this approach lays in the recognition that education and moral transformation can occur through culture and collective participation.

Conclusion

Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy represents one of the most significant religious and cultural movements in the history of medieval Assam. His *Eka Śaraṇa Nāma Dharma* is fundamentally a philosophy of devotion and surrender to the Supreme Lord. Nevertheless, its social and ethical implications reveal a strong humanistic dimension. His emphasis on spiritual equality, compassion, humility, moral conduct, social harmony and accessibility of religious knowledge contributed to the development of a more cohesive social environment. Through *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiyā Nāṭ*, *nāma-kīrtana* and the institution of the *nāmaghar*, he transformed philosophical and devotional ideals into living social and cultural practices. The humanism of Śaṅkaradeva should therefore be understood within the framework of Bhakti rather than through the categories of modern secular humanism. His humanistic vision is grounded in the belief that devotion to God should produce humility, compassion, ethical conduct and harmonious relationships among human beings. In this sense, Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy presents a significant synthesis of spirituality, morality and social responsibility. His teachings continue to possess considerable relevance for contemporary society because they encourage human beings to transcend ego, discrimination and conflict and to cultivate a life based on devotion, compassion and collective harmony.

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