



# Contribution of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev to Assamese Literature: An Evaluation

**Md Farizul Hoque**

Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese  
Swami Yogananda Giri College, Sakti Ashram

## Abstract

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev (1449–1568) occupies a prominent place in the history of Assamese literature, religion, and culture. As a saint, reformer, poet, dramatist, and social visionary, his contributions transformed Assamese society and literary traditions. His works, composed in Assamese and Brajavali—a hybrid literary dialect played a pivotal role in standardising the language and making literature accessible to the masses. His devotional poetry, particularly- Borgeet, combined lyrical beauty with spiritual depth, enriching Assamese literary heritage and devotional practice. In addition, his dramatic compositions, notably Ankia Naat and Bhaona, pioneered a distinctive theatrical tradition that fused literature, music, and performance, creating a holistic cultural experience. His text, such as Kirtana-ghosha, Gunamala and translations of the Bhagavata Purana reveals his skill in narrative prose and poetic expression.

Sankardev’s literature not only served religious purposes but also promoted social cohesion, egalitarian values, and communal participation, transcending caste and class barriers. By integrating literature with performance, music, and religious practice, he established a literary tradition that continues to inspire writers, scholars, and performers in Assam. In this article, an attempt has been made to critically examine his literary works and achievements, focusing on their cultural, linguistic, and social significance.

**Keywords:** Srimanta Sankardev, Assamese literature, Borgeet, Ankia Naat, Kirtana-ghosha, devotional literature.

## **Introduction:**

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev (1449–1568) stands as one of the most transformative figures in the cultural, religious, and literary history of Assam. Revered primarily as a saint-reformer and the founder of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, his contribution to Assamese literature is both vast and transformative. At a time when Assamese society was fragmented by ritualism, caste divisions, and linguistic limitations, Sankardeva

employed literature as a powerful medium to communicate spiritual ideas in a simple, accessible, and aesthetically rich form. His literary works not only popularised devotional values but also laid a strong foundation for the growth and standardization of Assamese literature. Before him, Assamese literary production was largely confined to courtly or elite circles and heavily influenced by Sanskrit. He revolutionised this tradition by composing literary works in the vernacular Assamese language and its Brajavali form, thereby making religious and philosophical ideas comprehensible to the common people. Through his writings, literature became an instrument of social reform, moral instruction, and cultural unity.

His devotional compositions, especially Borgeet, display lyrical elegance and emotional depth, while his narrative works such as Kirtana-ghosha and Gunamala exemplify his skill in adapting classical religious texts into engaging literary forms. Equally, his dramatic creations, known as Ankia Naat, which combined poetry, music, dialogue, and performance to convey moral and spiritual teachings. His works marked a decisive shift from elitist literary expression to a people-oriented literary culture. This article critically evaluates his contributions to Assamese literature, focusing cultural, linguistic, and social significance.

**Objectives:** The main objectives of the study are-

- i) To examine the major literary works of Srimanta Sankardev, including his devotional poetry, dramatic compositions, prose writings, and translations and its literary significance.
- ii) To analyse the social and cultural impact of Sankardev's literature on Assamese society.
- iii) To evaluate critically the contribution of Srimanta Sankardev to Assamese literature in a comprehensive and critical manner.

### **Methodology:**

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research methodology, primarily based on secondary sources. Textual analysis of the major literary works of Srimanta Sankardev such as Kirtana-ghosha, Gunamala, Ankia Naat, and Borgeet are analysed to understand their thematic content, language, literary form, and stylistic features. Research papers, books, journal articles, and critical essays by eminent scholars on Sankardev and Assamese literature are reviewed to evaluate different interpretations of his literary contribution. Since his literature is closely linked with music, drama, and religious practice, insights from cultural studies and performance traditions are also considered.

### **Review of Literature:**

The contribution of Srimanta Sankardeva to Assamese literature has been widely examined by scholars from literary, historical, cultural, and religious perspectives. Over the decades, researchers have emphasised his role

not only as a saint and social reformer but also as a pioneering literary figure that shaped the course of Assamese language and literature.

One of the earliest studies on Sankardeva is provided by Maheswar Neog (1965) in *Sankardeva and His Times*. Neog situates Sankardeva within the socio-political and cultural milieu of medieval Assam and highlights how his literary works served as instruments of religious reform and mass education. Neog emphasizes that Sankardeva's use of the Assamese vernacular and Brajvali language marked a significant departure from the dominance of Sanskrit and made literature accessible to common people.

Banikantha Kakati (1948), in his critical essays on Assamese literature, evaluates Sankardeva's literary genius from a stylistic and linguistic perspective. He argues that Sankardeva's writings played a decisive role in standardising Assamese prose and poetry. He particularly appreciates the aesthetic balance between devotion and artistry in works like *Kirtana Ghosa*, describing them as milestones in the evolution of Assamese poetic tradition.

B. K. Baruah (1986) in his work "A Cultural History of Assam" views Sankardeva's literary activities as part of a broader cultural renaissance in Assam. To him, Sankardeva's dramas, songs, and poetic compositions helped unify Assamese society by creating a shared literary and devotional culture that transcended caste and class divisions.

Urmila Goswami (1998), in *An Introduction to Assamese Literature*, provides a comprehensive overview of Sankardeva's position in the history of Assamese literature. She highlights Sankardeva's versatility across genres, including poetry, drama, music, and prose. She points out that the Ankiya Naat tradition introduced innovative narrative techniques and enriched Assamese dramatic literature both structurally and thematically.

Overall, the existing scholarship unanimously recognises Srimanta Sankardeva as a foundational figure in Assamese literature. However, further critical studies are required to explore his literary techniques in comparison with other medieval Indian literary traditions.

### **Brief Introduction of Srimanta Sankardev:**

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was born in 1449 at Alipukhuri near Bardowa of present Nagaon district, Assam. His father's name was Kusumbar Bhuyan and mother's name was Satyasandhya. He lost his parents at an early age and was raised by his grandmother, Khersuti. He received his early education at traditional *tol* under the guidance of Mahendra Kandali, a renowned scholar of the time. There, he mastered Sanskrit scriptures, philosophy, logic, and poetry, while also developing a strong interest in art, music, and drama. He showed his extra ordinary talent by composing the poem "Karatal Kamal Kamal Dal Nayan" at the age of 12. After completing his formal education at the age of 21, Sankardev assumed responsibilities as a household head and community leader.

However, a major turning point in his life came during his pilgrimage to various sacred centers across India, including Puri, Varanasi, and Vrindavan. Influenced by Bhakti movement, he embraced devotion to lord Vishnu as the supreme path of salvation. On returning to Assam, Sankardev dedicated himself to spreading Ekasarana Naam Dharma, a form of monotheistic Vaishnavism centered on exclusive devotion to Krishna through chanting, singing, and ethical living.

Sankardev strongly opposed social evils such as caste discrimination, ritualism, and superstition. He advocated a simple and inclusive path to spiritual liberation that welcomed people from all social backgrounds. He established Satras (monastic institutions) and Namghars (community prayer halls), which became centers of spiritual, cultural, and social life. His works include Kirtan Ghosa, Borgeet, Ankiya Naat, and translations of the Bhagavata Purana.

Srimanta Sankardev spent his last part of his life in Koch Bihar, where he continued teaching and writing until his death in 1568. Koch King Naranarayan wanted to accept his discipleship but he refused to grant him discipleship. His legacy endures as a symbol of spiritual harmony, cultural unity, and literary excellence in Assam.

### **Literary Works / Innovations:**

Sankaradeva was one of the unique creators of Assamese literature. There is no aspect of Assamese national life and culture that has not been touched by the skillful hands of Sankaradeva. Krishna Narayan Prasad Magadh, a renowned Hindi scholar, remarks: "In his works, Sankardev appeared as poet and playwright, lyricist and prose writer, verse and prose writer, musician and kirtan singer, devotee and thinker, preacher and actor, editor and translator expressed". The literature of Sankaradeva is mainly based on the Srimad Bhagavatam. His literary career was guided by his extensive study of Vaishnava literature in Sanskrit and his genuine love for the indigenous language. According to the content, his literary works may be classified into following categories:

#### **1. Poetic Works:**

Sankardev was the pioneer of Assamese devotional poetry. His poetic creations are deeply rooted in Bhakti or devotion. His poems were mainly written in Assamese and Brajavali, a literary language he popularized for devotional expression. He wrote several narrative works and scholars have called these poems. They are-

a) **Harichandra–Upakhyana:** This is believed to be the first poem of Sankaradeva. The narrative of the poem is taken from chapters 7-9 of the Markandeya Purana. This narrative poem retells the legend of King Harichandra, emphasizing truth, sacrifice, and unwavering devotion. Literarily, it stands out for its simple diction, strong narrative flow, and ethical idealism, making abstract virtues accessible to common readers.

b) **Rukmini Haran:** Based on the Bhagavata Purana, this poem narrates Krishna's elopement with Rukmini. Sankardeva blends romance with devotion, portraying Krishna as both divine and heroic. Its literary

significance lies in lyrical beauty, dramatic tension, and refined use of imagery, marking a high point in Assamese narrative poetry.

**c) Ajamil Upakhyana:** This work illustrates the redemptive power of bhakti through the story of Ajamil, a sinner saved by uttering God's name. Sankardeva's treatment stresses compassion over ritualism. The poem is important for its didactic tone, emotional appeal, and promotion of egalitarian Vaishnavism.

**d) Amrit Manthan:** Depicting the churning of the ocean, this poem symbolically represents the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Sankardeva's poetic imagination, vivid descriptions, and allegorical depth give the work literary richness and philosophical significance.

**e) Bali Chalan :** Centering on Vamana's subjugation of King Bali, the poem explores humility and divine grace. Its literary merit lies in character portrayal and moral contrast, reinforcing the bhakti ideal through narrative poetry.

**f) Kurukshetra:** This poem presents Krishna's teachings during the Mahabharata war, highlighting devotion, duty, and surrender. It is significant for its philosophical tone, powerful dialogues and successful integration of epic grandeur with devotional lyricism.

## 2. Devotional Works:

**a) Bhaktipradeep:** Bhaktipradeep is a concise devotional treatise that expounds the core principles of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. Drawing mainly from the Bhagavata tradition, he presents devotion as the simplest and purest path to salvation. Its literary significance lies in its lucid prose-poetic style, logical structure, and use of familiar idioms, which made complex Vaishnava philosophy accessible to the common people.

**b) Bhaktiratnakara:** This work is a systematic compilation of devotional doctrines selected from authoritative Sanskrit texts. He arranges these teachings with clarity and purpose, emphasizing humility, surrender, and constant remembrance of God. It is valued for its organised presentation, didactic tone, and refined Assamese expression, marking an important phase in the development of religious prose.

**c) Nimi-Narasiddha Sambad:** Written in dialogue form, this work records a spiritual conversation between King Nimi and the sage Narasiddha. It explores philosophical questions related to devotion and liberation. Its literary importance lies in its dialogic technique, clarity of argument, and effective blending of philosophy with devotional emotion.

**d) Anadi Patana:** Anadi Patana narrates the spiritual fall of the soul due to ignorance and attachment. The work emphasizes surrender to God as the means of liberation. Its symbolic narration, moral depth, and simple yet evocative language enhance its devotional and literary value.

### 3. Translated works:

Srimanta Sankardeva significantly enriched Assamese literature through his translations and adaptations of major Sanskrit religious texts. His primary objective was to make spiritual teachings understandable to ordinary people who had no access to Sanskrit learning. Among his most important translated works are Kirtan-Ghosa, Gunamala, the Bhagavad Purana (1st, 2nd, 6th, 8th, 10th, 11th and 12th Skandas) and the Uttarakanda Ramayana. Gunamala presents the essence of the Bhagavata in a brief and lucid form, while Kirtan-Ghosa translates devotional narratives into lyrical compositions suitable for congregational singing. The translation of the Bhagavad Gita is beautiful in terms of narrative power, language and rhythm, tone, ornamentation, etc. He also adapted episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reshaping them to reflect the ideals of devotion and moral conduct.

This translated works helped to spread the principles of Ek Saran Nam Dharma, which advocates exclusive devotion to Lord Krishna and rejects ritual complexity. By using simple Assamese language enriched with rhythm and music, Sankardeva made sacred knowledge accessible to all sections of society. His translations strengthened Assamese as a literary language, popularised devotional literature, and laid a strong foundation for the Bhakti movement in Assam.

### 4. Ankia Naat, Bhaona and Sattriya Dance:

Sankardev revolutionised Assamese literature through dramatic literature. He pioneered a unique dramatic genre called Ankia Naat- one-act devotional plays designed to convey religious narratives and ethical teachings to broad audiences. The Ankia Naat's are- i) Chihnajatra, ii) Patniprasad, iii) Kalidaman, iv) Keli Gopal, v) Rukmini Haran vi) Parijat Haraan and vii) Ramvijay. These plays were highly performative, combining dialogue, song, dance, and narration. They were written in Brajavali and often staged in open spaces or community halls, making literature an immersive and collective experience rather than a private or elite endeavor.

Closely associated with Ankia Naat was the performance tradition of Bhaona, which continues to be a living theatrical tradition in Assam. Through these dramatic forms, Sankardev not only communicated scriptural narratives but also embedded moral and ethical teachings into public cultural practice.

Sattriya dance emerged as a performative extension of Sankardev's literary and dramatic works. Now-a-days it is known as a classical dance. Through music, verse, and movement, Sattriya exemplified the inseparable nature of literary text and cultural performance in Assamese tradition.

## 5. Devotional Songs (Borgeet):

Borgeet are classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. These songs are dedicated mainly to Lord Krishna and form an important part of the Ekasarana Namadharma tradition of Assam. Written in Brajavali language, Borgeets follow strict rules of raga and tala, reflecting classical musical discipline. They express deep devotion, surrender, and philosophical ideas of Vaishnavism through simple yet emotionally rich lyrics. Sung in Namghars and religious gatherings, Borgeets have played a vital role in shaping Assamese devotional music and preserving its spiritual and cultural heritage.

Some example includes Mana Meri Rama-Caranahi Lagu (first composition), Pāwe pari hari, Kaho re Uddhava, and Madhuro Muroti. Bhatima, Totoy and Chapay are also come under his devotional songs. The Borgeet not only enriched Assamese devotional literature but also became an integral part of Assamese cultural identity, continuing to be sung in Namghars and Sattras to this day.

## 6. Narrative Prose Works:

**Kirtan Ghosa:** Among his most influential literary masterpieces mention may be made about Kirtana-ghosha. Composed in Assamese and Brajavali, the text is a collection of lyrical hymns (kirtans) based mainly on episodes from the Bhagavata Purana. Its central theme is Ek-Saran-Nam-Dharma, the path of single-minded devotion to Lord Krishna through the chanting of His name. The work was intended not for elite scholars but for the common people, making devotion accessible through simple language, music, and collective singing.

From a literary point of view, Kirtan Ghosa holds immense significance. It marks a decisive shift from Sanskrit-dominated religious literature to a vibrant vernacular tradition in Assamese. Sankardev's poetic style blends clarity with emotional intensity, using rhythm, repetition, and musicality to create a powerful aesthetic effect. The Kirtan Ghosa stands as a cornerstone of Assamese literature, uniting devotion, art, and social reform in a single literary masterpiece.

**Gunamala:** Gunamala is a notable devotional prose work of Srimanta Sankardev that summarizes the core teachings of the Bhagavata Purana. Written in simple Assamese with touches of Brajavali, it was meant for common people unfamiliar with Sanskrit. Literarily, Gunamala is significant for its clear, direct, and didactic prose style, which contributed to the early growth of Assamese prose literature. Sankardev successfully presented complex Vaishnavite philosophy in an easy and engaging manner. The text promotes eka-sarana-nama-dharma, emphasizing devotion, moral values, and surrender to Lord Krishna.

## Discussion and Critical Analysis:

While Sankardeva is often celebrated as a saint and reformer, a deeper analysis shows that his literary output played a central role in shaping both the form and function of Assamese literature. His works were not merely devotional texts; they were carefully crafted literary compositions that combined aesthetic appeal with

philosophical depth. His literature was deeply intertwined with the spiritual ethos of Ek-Saran- Nama-Dharma. It was based on the Bhagavata Purana which focuses on Eka Deva , Eka Seva and Eka Biney Nahi Kewa, that means one God, one service and no other refuge.

By using the vernacular Assamese language and developing a hybrid literary mode called Brajavali-a blend of Assamese and Maithili- he widened the reach of his message. This use of Brajavali language in literary and theatrical productions not only facilitated easy comprehension among audiences but also enriched Assamese literary forms. **However**, some critics argue that the dominance of devotional themes limited the scope of imaginative diversity in medieval Assamese literature. Despite this limitation, Sankardeva's success lies in transforming religious discourse into a powerful literary tradition that resonated deeply with the masses.

In poetry, works such as Kirtana Ghosa display remarkable control over rhythm, imagery, and emotional appeal. Sankardeva's poetic style is marked by simplicity rather than ornamentation, which some critics interpret as a lack of complexity. Yet, this simplicity serves a clear literary purpose: it enhances clarity, memorability, and oral transmission. From a modern critical perspective, this stylistic choice can be viewed as an early form of reader-oriented literature, prioritizing accessibility over elite sophistication.

Sankardeva's contribution to drama through Ankiya Naat represents another major literary achievement. These plays introduced innovative narrative techniques, including the use of the Sutradhar and musical interludes, which enriched Assamese dramatic literature. While the dramatic structure may appear didactic by modern standards, it successfully merged performance, poetry, and philosophy, thereby expanding the expressive range of Assamese literature.

The analysis shows that although Sankardeva's literature is ideologically centered on bhakti, its literary significance lies in its formal innovation, linguistic impact, and enduring cultural relevance.

### **Findings of the Study:**

- i) Srimanta Sankardeva played a foundational role in the development and popularization of Assamese literature by using the vernacular language.
- ii) His literary works contributed significantly to the standardization and enrichment of Assamese poetic and prose traditions.
- iii) Sankardeva introduced new literary genres and forms, particularly Ankiya Naat and devotional lyrical poetry.
- iv) His literature functioned as a medium of social reform, promoting values of equality, devotion, and ethical living.
- v) Despite thematic limitations centered on religion, his works achieved wide literary and cultural influence.

vi) Sankardeva's literary legacy continues to shape Assamese literary consciousness and creative traditions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Srimanta Sankardev's contribution to Assamese literature is unparalleled. His contribution extends beyond the boundaries of religious writing and establishes him as a pioneering literary architect of Assam. By adopting the vernacular language and integrating devotion with literary creativity, Sankardeva transformed literature into a dynamic cultural force accessible to all sections of society.

His achievements in poetry, drama, prose, and music collectively enriched Assamese literature and laid a durable foundation for its future growth. Although his literary themes were predominantly devotional, their artistic merit, linguistic innovation, and social relevance ensure their lasting value. Sankardeva's literature not only reflected the spiritual aspirations of his age but also shaped the linguistic and cultural identity of Assam. Therefore, an assessment of Assamese literary history remains incomplete without acknowledging Srimanta Sankardeva's monumental contribution. His works continue to inspire scholars, writers, and readers, reaffirming his status as one of the greatest figures in Indian regional literature.

## References:

1. Baruah, B. K. (1978). *History of Assamese Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
2. Baruah, B. K. (1986). *A Cultural History of Assam*. Guwahati: Bina Library.
3. Baruah, S. L. (1999). *A comprehensive History of Assam*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
4. Chaliha, B. (1976). *Sankardeva*. Guwahati: Studies in Culture.
5. Das, N. (2020). *Role of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev in Language, Literature and Culture of Assam: A critical Perspective*. International Journal of Management, 11(10), 311–318.
6. Das, Tanuram (2017): *Srimanta Sankardevar Darshan*, K.M. PUBLISHING, Panbazar, Guwahati.
7. Goswami, U. (2003). *An introduction to Assamese Literature*, Spectrum Publications
8. Kakati, B.K. (1959). *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
9. Neog, M. (1965). *Sankardeva and His Times*. Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati.
10. Neog, M. (2006). *Sri Sri Sankardeva*. Chandra Prakash, Panbazar Gauhati.
11. Sarma, S. N. (2005). *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and Assamese Literature*. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam.
12. Sharma, S. N. (1978). *Assamese literature*. Sahitya Akademi.
13. Sharma Daloi, Dr. H.N. (2013): *Sankardevar Sahitya Pratibha (Pt.II)*, Jayasri Printing Press, Nalbari.
14. *Asomia Sahityar Buranji*.(2023). PG AS S1-01 (DSE), KKHSOU
15. Searchlight.