

Namghosa, A Stream of Devotion and Spirituality: Exploring Contemporariness from Madhavdev to Vinoba Bhave

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Abstract

The genesis of the Bhakti Movement can be traced back to between the 5th and 10th centuries, peaking during the 14th–15th centuries with pan-Indian influence. Saints and followers sought a more inclusive spiritual path, making religiosity simpler and more accessible. One of the pioneering Vaishnava poet-saints, Srimanta Sankardev, initiated this movement in Northeast India's Brahmaputra valley, leading to the development of Ek Saran Hari Nam Dharma. The Nava Vaishnav movement produced Bhakti literature that resonated deeply with the common people.

A foundational Assamese Bhakti text is Namghosa, composed by Sri Sri Madhavdev. This paper explores the continuity and spiritual significance of Namghosa, examining how it transcended time and inspired the 20th-century Gandhian reformer Vinoba Bhave, who condensed the text into Namghosa-Navneet. The paper investigates how Bhave interpreted Namghosa's core tenets to align with his philosophy of service and devotion, emphasizing its relevance in modern India.

Keywords: Bhakti, Madhavdev, Vinoba Bhave, Namghosa, Namghosa-Navneet

Introduction

Bhakti Movement constitutes an integral part of socio-religious evolution of India that transformed prevailing religious setting wherein Brahmanical ritualistic worship forming the core. The movement initiated a marked departure from the practiced religious norms dominated by Brahmanical Hindu religion with elaborate rituals. In hierarchical social structure bhakti brought in an element of social egalitarianism. Egalitarian approach in quest of spirituality and a simpler form of worship getting closer to the divine being, by prayer and chanting mantras are features of the movement. Bhakti movement essentially transcended marked social divisions and emphasized a dignified social existence irrespective of class, caste and gender.

Genesis of the movement could be traced back to the Alvar and Nayanar saints of Tamil Nadu did a path breaking work of composing devotional poetry in vernacular language making it easily accessible to commoners. Alvars and Nayanars prepared the ground for subsequent Bhakti tradition having much greater influence across India.

Medieval exponents of Bhakti movement like Ramananda, Kabir, Mirabai, Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev (1489-1596) immensely contributed to the rich tapestry of bhakti movement. Centrality of the

movement has been a personal emotional connect with the divine through a much simpler way contrary to an institutionalized, elaborate ritualistic practices conducted by a priestly order.

Core of the Bhakti Movement comprises of the concept of the Bhakti (devotion) as the primary mean to attain salvation. Monotheism, simplicity, accessibility and a direct personal connect with the divine characterize the movement that swept across India for centuries. Another hallmark of the movement has been the composition of Bhakti poetry in vernacular languages.

In the context of Assam Srimanta Sankardev and his chief disciple Madhavdev initiated the movement that eventually led to a socio-religious transformation never experienced before. These two apostles of Bhakti movement were multifaceted personality and their immense contribution to doctrinal aspects written in a form of verse and with its musicality helped create a strong base of followers. From these perspectives the role of Namghosa is prodigious, for its being integral to the procedural part of the daily rituals of Satra and Namghar (Community prayer Hall) that starts and concludes with Namghosa. Offering blessings, conveying a matter by a Bhakat (Devotee associate with Namghar and Satra) is also conducted through Ghosa. It also conveys a poignant pleading by a devotee to God in a relationship wherein Krishna is the *pranabandhaba*.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the spiritual continuity and cultural contemporariness embedded in *Namghosa*, a seminal Bhakti text authored by Madhavdev, and its reinterpretation by Vinoba Bhave in his *Namghosa-Navneet*. The research aims to investigate how Bhave, a 20th-century Gandhian philosopher and reformer, engaged with this medieval devotional text, extracted its philosophical essence, and contextualized it within the framework of modern Indian socio-spiritual movements. The study further seeks to highlight the bridging of epochs through Bhakti as a living tradition that continues to resonate across historical boundaries.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative textual analysis** approach grounded in literary and cultural studies. The study is based on a close reading of primary texts, including *Namghosa* by Madhavdev and *Namghosa-Navneet* by Vinoba Bhave, alongside their respective translations and commentaries. The methodology includes:

- **Comparative textual analysis** to trace thematic and philosophical continuities between the original verses of *Namghosa* and Bhave's condensed interpretations.
- **Historical-contextual approach** to understand the socio-political milieu of 15th-16th century Assam and 20th-century post-independence India.
- **Interpretative analysis** of Vinoba Bhave's reflections and his conceptual innovations such as "sewa-rasa" in light of Assamese Vaishnavite philosophy.
- **Secondary sources** such as critical essays, journals, and biographical accounts have been used to support contextual and interpretive insights.

This triangulated methodology allows for a nuanced examination of how devotion, service, and spirituality travel across time and find renewed relevance in changing socio-cultural contexts.

Discussion

Spirituality of Namghosa

Srimanta Sankardev while reaching out to the marginalized and the tribals, made the Bhagavat a mythological composition easy to comprehend. Simplicity in form and content is the hallmark of Vaishnav literary creation. Simple yet aesthetically of very high standard provided a wide base to the Ek Saran Nam Dharma enhancing its acceptability. Deeper philosophical tenets of the Nam Dharma, theological doctrine contained in it establishes the Namghosa as one of the pillars of Ek Saran Nam Dharma.

Madhavdev accomplished many of the well thought out task initiated by Sankardev adding new dimension to it. Timeless creations of the Vaishnava saints like Namghosa besides enriching Assamese literature founded a society wherein people belonging to the lower strata started experiencing a dignified living within the fold of Ek Saran Hari Nam Dharma.

Namghosa is considered as one of the *Saariputhi* (the four core scripture of Ek Saran Nam Dharma). An outstanding creation of the Vaishnava age Namghosa besides being a devotional verse is also integral to the daily ritualistic practice of a large section of the people of Assam. A work as disciplined, well-organized, and harmoniously structured as *Namghosa* is rare—not only in Assamese literature but in any literary tradition. (Datta 38–39).

Motivational force if considered behind the composing of Namghosa must have been the idea of providing a philosophical base and theological perspective as well as making it a daily ritual adding a performing element. Musicality of Namghosa depends on its literary text and a blissful state of mind experienced in its singing. “Namghosa is the record of religious experiences of a genuinely devoted soul and it may also be regarded as an expression of spiritual craving of a whole generation of men stirred to a religious quest by diverse thought-currents and practices of the day.” (Sarma 164).

Namghosa shaped the spiritual leaning of a people engrossed in new found bliss of Ek Saran Nam Dharma. Sankardev instructed Madhavdev to compose a book incorporating the teaching of Nam Dharma presented in soft elegant verses, easy to comprehend at the same time musical in rhythm. (Sarma 165). Accordingly, Madhavdev composed Namghosa extracting verses from Sanskrit scriptures and other sources. The work was initiated during the lifetime of Sri Sankardev; however, there is reason to believe that it was not completed during his time. Based on available evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the book was finalized and released in the latter half of the 16th century, likely between 1585 and 1595 A.D. (Barooah). The *Namghosa*, also known as *Hajari Ghosha* (The Thousand Verses), appears to have drawn extensively from Sanskrit scriptures and other classical sources. (Neog 97). However, the intensity Madhavdeva's stream of thought and elegance of expression takes it to another level of aesthetic embellishment as these sources were transformed. It is evident that Madhavdev carefully selected ideas from Sanskrit texts that suited his spiritual themes, translating and incorporating verses into Assamese where appropriate.

His seamless integration of these quotations blurs the distinction between the original and his own composition. His profound understanding of the *sāstras* (scriptures) allowed him to appropriate and adapt content with remarkable ease, blending it naturally with his own ideas. Barooah stated Madhavdev “liquefied” the quotations—so thoroughly absorbing them into his compositions that they became indistinguishable from his own voice.

Contemporariness of Namghosa

Namghosa from its composition has been an integral part of the preaching of Nam Dharma and its performing element in day-to-day ritual of the people of Assam has transformed it into a living tradition.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave (11 September 1895 - 15 November 1982) one of the ardent followers of Mahatma Gandhi as well as a social reformer created a tremendous impact in post independent India steering a movement called Bhoodan-Gramdan movement in 1951. As part of the movement when he was travelling the length and breadth of India, he made a plan to visit North-east India. But his coming to North-East India happened in the backdrop of a stirring language movement erupting in July 1960. In an atmosphere of growing estrangement in Assam “Pandit Nehru wrote to Vinoba on 15 September that if he could go there and have a dialogue with the local people, it would immensely help normalise the situation.” (Cholkar 216). Reaching Assam on 5 March 1961 Vinoba stated that Assam presents a picture of miniature India and it should give a massage of confluence of cultures to the country. (Cholkar 218)

In his brief stay in Assam as a part of the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement he studied the spiritual literature of Assam and the one that moved him to the extent of translating it was the Namghosa, the timeless contribution of Madhavdev. Cholkar stated: “It was his practice to study prominent spiritual literature in the state he was going to visit, quote from it profusely in his lectures there, and thus communicate his message through the time-tested words of the saints revered by the local populace. In Assam, he studied the works of Shri Sankardev and Shri Madhavdev, particularly the latter’s ‘Namaghosha’. He even condensed it and apprised the country of the spiritual wisdom of the great saint, hitherto little known outside Assam.”(218).

In spite of a long-time gap between Madhavdev and Vinoba Bhave the former belonging to 15th -16th century and the latter to 19th -20th Century a close spiritual connect had been established through Namghosa when the latter read and grasped the deep spiritual meaning and relevance of the scripture making it a point to translate it in a condensed form. This translated version as Namghosa Navneet later became widely known in India.

Namghosa-Navneet by Vinoba Bhave

Titled as prayer the first section of the book is a reflection of his realisation of the spirituality in life as well as the core of devotion that is blissful wherein the devotee surrenders to the Supreme being without expectation. The eternal bliss attained through *Sewa*, service to the humanity, was in tune with his own philosophical interpretation of service, embodied in the entirety of the Bhoodan movement launched and guided by Vinoba for twenty years.

Centrality of the entire concept of devotion Vinoba extracted from this line of Namghosa, “diya moka sewa-rasa sar” (Bhave 9). He stated that *sewa-rasa* is a new word unlike the other rasas for instance bhakti-rasa, nabarasa etc. it is a word prevalent in Assam only. He expected that the word should spread throughout India. (Bhave 9). His interpretation is to be understood in wider context of Bhoodan-Gramdan movement as he could relate the spirituality of sewa-rasa to the contemporary social reform movement. This perspective he applied in the study of Namghosa added a new dimension that enriches the continuous tradition of devotion enshrined in Namghosa. The philosophical and practical aspect of the new Vaishnavite cult initiated by Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev contains a strong element of sewa of the human being- Nararupi Narayan, and this glorification of sewa accepted as the essence of devotion as he also stated: Janata Bhagawan, Janata Kalpataru. (Bhave 9).

Vinoba’s Namghosa-Navneet is not merely a translation of the thousand verses of Namghosa, but rather a thoughtful reflection of his *chintan* (contemplation). According to the publisher, Vinoba Bhave wrote Namghosa-Navneet after a careful and in-depth study of Namghosa-Sar. Bhave’s Namghosa-Sar itself is an essence of Madhavdeva’s Namghosa comprising of 500 verses.

Namghosa-Navneet is structured into three sections entitled “*Prarthana, Upadesa and Mahima*”. Each section is again subdivided. The first section is devoted to *Prarthana, Anunaya, Arati, Udbudhan, Kakuti* and *Minati*. The second section is devoted to *Rahashya, Sadhana, Lokaprabah, Bhakti, Boddhijug, Murhajan swabhab, Janma Saphalya, Geeta Nirnay, Padapantha, Niti* and *Nigaman*. The third section is divided into *Kirtan-srabanadi, Nischy, Ratnatray, Prabhab, Prerana, Jug-sar, Namayan, Prapti* and *Purnahuti*. Thematically all the three sections are interconnected.

Vinoba Bhave in his Namghosa-Navneet focused on blissful service and his effort was directed towards inspiring the people of modern India for service to the humanity that also forms the quintessence of Namghosa’s propitiation. In his commentary pertaining to some of the verses of Namghosa he invoked persons like saint Tukaram, Srimanta Sankardev, Gyanadeva and also Napoleon Bonaparte as and when required. (Bhave 11, 30, 61 & 87). His thoughtful analysis conveyed through the commentaries are based on deep understanding of the scripture with a desire to bring forth the benefaction of Namghosa.

Bhave’s reference to Bhagwat Geeta which he did quite a number of times to interpret verses as well as his own opinion. (Bhave 60). In fact, Bhave discussed in the chapter Geeta Nirnay Madhavdeva’s Geeta related theme (Bhave 58-62). In this book Bhave brings in the reference of Namghar, the enduring legacy of Srimanta Sankardev while discussing Namghosa: -

“There are ‘Namghar’ in Assam for the remembrance of the Bhagavad. Is there a need for such a house to chant the name of God? Is there no space for remembrance of God in the homestead? Remembering God is an innermost heartfelt act. But it has a purpose. The Namghar is built to bring the village together. There is no need to take the name of Ram alone, everyone should take it together. That's why he says: *Layu hari nam sat-panche huiya saju/Apun hure palai beka kala-maya baju.*” (Bhave 51)

Bhave brought a new approach to the study of Namghosa, wherein the perception of a modern man towards a mediaeval scripture and its relevant we observe as he talked about devotion and service.

The language that he used in Namghosa-Navneet is plain and straight. In simple, short sentences he effortlessly conveyed the profound philosophical meaning of the verses of Namghosa. For easy comprehension of the readers similes were used to bring home the ideas he wanted people to understand. Another feature of this work is the incorporation of simple stories for easy understanding of philosophical content of the verses.

Finally Vinoba Bhave placed Namghosa as one of the finest creations of the great Indian literary tradition and he always advocated that the people of India should follow the devotional path as propagated in Namghosa. In his view the strength and significant of this book lies in the fact that the Namghosa of Madhavdev could be a guiding spirit for the entire people of India for amoral and ethical living. (Bhave 2).

Conclusion

Namghosa, composed by Sri Sri Madhavdev, stands as a timeless spiritual and literary beacon in the Indian Bhakti tradition, particularly within the Assamese socio-religious context. Rooted in the Ek Saran Nam Dharma initiated by Srimanta Sankardev, *Namghosa* not only reflects the theological depth and philosophical clarity of the Bhakti movement but also continues to guide the spiritual and ethical life of its followers through its lyrical beauty and devotional fervour.

Vinoba Bhave’s engagement with 'Namghosa' through his work 'Namghosa-Navneet' exemplifies a remarkable continuity of spiritual thought across centuries. His interpretation and condensation of Madhavdev’s verses reflect a profound connection between the medieval Bhakti ideals and the modern

Gandhian philosophy of selfless service, egalitarianism, and inner devotion. Bhave's emphasis on 'sewa-rasa' as a new spiritual expression aligns seamlessly with the moral core of Namghosa and its message of devotion through action and compassion.

By interpreting 'Namghosa' in the context of contemporary social realities and movements like 'Bhoodan-Gramdan', Vinoba Bhave reinvigorated its relevance for modern India. His approach underscores the capacity of classical devotional literature to transcend temporal and cultural boundaries, offering insights that remain pertinent in shaping a just, inclusive, and spiritually grounded society.

In this way, 'Namghosa'—through both Madhavdev's original composition and Vinoba Bhave's reflective 'Namghosa-Navneet'—continues to serve as a living tradition. It connects the divine with the mundane, the philosophical with the practical, and the medieval with the modern. As such, it remains not only a cornerstone of Assamese Bhakti literature but also a guiding text for moral and spiritual life in contemporary India and beyond.

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