

The Influence of Vaishnavism on Assamese Literature and Culture: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Vaishnavism, particularly the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by the saint-scholar **Srimanta Sankardeva**, played a decisive role in shaping Assamese literature and culture. Beginning in the fifteenth century, this movement introduced a new religious philosophy known as *Ekasarana Nama Dharma*, which emphasized devotion to Lord Krishna and rejected rigid social hierarchies. The movement did not remain limited to religious teachings but deeply influenced literature, language, performing arts, and social life in Assam. Through literary works such as *Kirtan Ghosa*, *Borgeets*, and *Ankiya Naat*, Vaishnavite ideas were disseminated among the common people in the vernacular Assamese language. Institutions like *Namghar* and *Satra* also contributed significantly to cultural and literary development. This research paper analyses the influence of Vaishnavism on Assamese literature and culture, focusing on its literary contributions, cultural transformation, and social impact. The study highlights that the Vaishnavite movement created a cultural renaissance in Assam and played a vital role in forming Assamese identity.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Assamese literature, Sankardeva, Neo-Vaishnavism, culture, Bhakti movement.

1. Introduction

Religion has always played a significant role in shaping the literature and culture of a society. In Assam, the most influential religious movement was the Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by the saint-reformer **Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568)**. This movement introduced a new form of Bhakti devotion known as *Ekasarana Nama Dharma*, which emphasized faith in one God, Lord Krishna.

Before the rise of Vaishnavism, Assamese society was largely dominated by ritualistic practices, caste divisions, and tantric traditions. Sankardeva's teachings challenged these rigid practices and introduced a simpler and more inclusive form of religious devotion. The movement united different communities and promoted social harmony.

More importantly, Vaishnavism deeply influenced Assamese literature and culture. Sankardeva and his disciples used literature, music, drama, and art as tools to spread their philosophy. As a result, a rich body of devotional literature emerged, often referred to as *Sankari literature*. This literature significantly contributed to the development of the Assamese language and cultural traditions.

This paper aims to analyse how Vaishnavism influenced Assamese literature and culture and how it shaped the identity of Assamese society.

2. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the origin and development of Vaishnavism in Assam.
2. To analyse the influence of Vaishnavism on Assamese literature.
3. To study the impact of Vaishnavism on Assamese culture and social life.
4. To evaluate the role of Sankardeva and his disciples in literary and cultural transformation.

3. Methodology

This research is based on **qualitative and analytical methods**. The study mainly uses **secondary sources**, including books, research papers, and scholarly articles on Assamese literature and Vaishnavism.

Methods Used

1. **Historical Method:** The study examines the historical development of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam from the fifteenth century onwards.
2. **Analytical Method:** Literary works of Sankardeva and other Vaishnavite writers are analysed to understand their influence on Assamese literature.
3. **Comparative Method:** The study compares the pre-Vaishnavite literary tradition with the Vaishnavite literary period to identify major transformations.

Sources of Data

- Books on Assamese literature and culture
- Research journals and scholarly articles
- Historical records and literary texts

4. Origin of Vaishnavism in Assam

Vaishnavism in Assam is closely associated with the Bhakti movement that spread across India during the medieval period. In Assam, the movement was led by **Srimanta Sankardeva**, who introduced Neo-Vaishnavism or *Ekasarana Nama Dharma*.

Sankardeva travelled across India for about twelve years and came into contact with various Bhakti traditions. Inspired by these ideas, he established a religious movement based on devotion to Krishna. His teachings emphasized equality, devotion, and moral living.

He established important religious institutions such as:

- **Namghar** – community prayer hall
- **Satra** – monastic institution for religious and cultural education

These institutions later became centers of literary production and cultural activities in Assam.

The movement soon gained popularity among people from different social backgrounds and gradually transformed the cultural landscape of Assam.

5. Influence of Vaishnavism on Assamese Literature

5.1 Emergence of Sankari Literature

The Vaishnavite movement gave rise to a new phase in Assamese literary history known as **Sankari literature**. This literary tradition focused mainly on devotion to Krishna and the teachings of Vaishnavism.

The literature of this period was characterized by:

- devotional themes
- simple language
- moral and spiritual teachings
- accessibility for common people

This helped to popularize Assamese as a literary language and strengthened cultural unity.

5.2 Literary Works of Sankardeva

Sankardeva was a great poet, dramatist, musician, and social reformer. He produced a large number of literary works that influenced Assamese literature.

Some of his major works include:

- *Kirtan Ghosa*
- *Bhakti Ratnakar*
- *Ankiya Naat* (one-act plays)
- *Borgeets* (devotional songs)

These works were composed in simple language so that common people could understand them easily.

For example, *Kirtan Ghosa* is a devotional text based on the Bhagavata Purana, which describes the life of Lord Krishna and the importance of devotion.

Through such works, Sankardeva not only spread religious ideas but also enriched Assamese literature.

5.3 Contribution of Madhavdeva

After Sankardeva, his disciple **Madhavdeva** played a crucial role in continuing the Vaishnavite literary tradition.

His important works include:

- *Naam Ghosa*
- *Borgeets*
- devotional poems and plays

Madhavdeva expanded the literary heritage of Vaishnavism and helped strengthen the movement in Assam.

5.4 Development of New Literary Forms

Vaishnavism introduced several new literary forms in Assamese literature, including:

Borgeet

Borgeets are devotional songs composed in praise of Lord Krishna. They are characterized by classical musical structure and spiritual depth.

Ankiya Naat

Ankiya Naat are one-act plays written by Sankardeva to spread Vaishnavite teachings among common people.

These plays later developed into **Bhaona**, a traditional theatrical performance in Assam.

Through these forms, literature became closely connected with performance and religious practice.

6. Influence of Vaishnavism on Assamese Culture

6.1 Social Reform and Equality

One of the most significant impacts of Vaishnavism was its emphasis on social equality. Sankardeva rejected rigid caste divisions and welcomed people from all communities into his religious movement.

This helped to create a sense of unity among different ethnic groups in Assam.

6.2 Cultural Institutions: Namghar and Satra

Namghars and Satras became important cultural institutions in Assamese society.

They served multiple functions:

- centers of religious worship
- educational institutions
- places for literary activities
- centers of music and drama

These institutions played a crucial role in preserving Assamese culture for centuries.

6.3 Influence on Performing Arts

Vaishnavism also greatly influenced the performing arts of Assam.

Sattriya Dance

Sattriya dance originated in the Satras and was later recognized as one of the classical dance forms of India.

Bhaona

Bhaona performances are dramatic enactments of Ankiya Naat plays. These performances combine drama, music, dance, and religious storytelling.

They remain an important part of Assamese cultural festivals.

6.4 Influence on Music and Art

Vaishnavite traditions also contributed to the development of:

- devotional music traditions
- manuscript painting
- mask making
- classical musical forms

These artistic traditions helped create a unique cultural identity for Assam.

7. Analytical Discussion

From an analytical perspective, Vaishnavism functioned not only as a religious movement but also as a **cultural revolution** in Assam.

Several factors explain its influence:

1. Use of Vernacular Language

By using the Assamese language instead of Sanskrit, Sankardeva made religious knowledge accessible to the masses.

1. Integration of Art and Religion

Vaishnavism used literature, music, drama, and dance to communicate its teachings.

2. Institutional Support

The establishment of Namghars and Satras provided strong institutional support for literary and cultural activities.

4. Social Inclusiveness

The movement promoted equality and brotherhood, which helped it gain widespread acceptance among people.

Because of these factors, Vaishnavism left a lasting impact on Assamese society.

8. Findings of the Study

The study reveals several important findings:

1. Vaishnavism brought a major transformation in Assamese literature.
2. Sankardeva and his disciples played a central role in this literary development.
3. New literary forms such as Borgeet and Ankiya Naat emerged during this period.
4. Vaishnavism significantly influenced Assamese culture, music, dance, and theatre.
5. Institutions like Namghar and Satra helped preserve cultural traditions for centuries.

9. Conclusion

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva was one of the most significant developments in the history of Assam. It brought a profound transformation in religion, literature, and culture.

Through his literary works, Sankardeva created a rich tradition of devotional literature that shaped the development of Assamese language and literature. His use of simple language and artistic expression helped spread spiritual ideas among the common people.

At the same time, Vaishnavism transformed Assamese culture by promoting social harmony, equality, and collective participation in religious and cultural activities. Institutions such as Namghars and Satras became centers of cultural life and played an important role in preserving traditions.

Even today, the influence of Vaishnavism can be seen in Assamese literature, music, theatre, and festivals. Therefore, it can be concluded that Vaishnavism was not merely a religious movement but a **cultural renaissance that shaped the identity of Assamese society.**

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