

Reassessing Madhavdeva: The Preceptorial Legacy and Institutional Shaping of Ekasarana Dharma

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Abstract:

Madhavdeva (c. 1489 or c. 1514-1596), venerated as Mahapurusha in the Assamese Vaishnavite tradition, stands as the principal preceptor and spiritual successor of Srimanta Sankardeva within the Ekasarana Dharma movement. This paper undertakes a comprehensive reappraisal of Madhavdeva's life, his transformative conversion from Shaktism to Vaishnavism, his institutional contributions through the Satra and Namghar systems, and his prodigious literary output-including the Naam Ghosa, Bhakti Ratnavali, 191 Borgeets, and nine Jhumura plays. Drawing upon hagiographical texts, modern historiography (notably Misra 2016), and the extant literary corpus, the study situates Madhavdeva not merely as Sankardeva's disciple but as an independent architect of Assam's religious, cultural, and social renaissance. The paper also examines the historiographical debate surrounding his birth date, the schism with Damodardeva, and the enduring institutional legacy of the Barpeta Satra and Sundaridiya Satra. It is argued that Madhavdeva's contributions-literary, philosophical, institutional, and performative constitute an indispensable and autonomous pillar of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam.

Keywords: Madhavdeva, Ekasarana Dharma, Sankardeva, Naam Ghosa, Borgeet, Satra, Namghar, Neo-Vaishnavism, Assam

1. Introduction:

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement that swept across Assam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries represents one of the most profound religious and cultural transformations in the history of Northeast India. At the centre of this movement stood Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), the saint-scholar who founded the Ekasarana Dharma-a monotheistic faith-centered on devotion to Lord Krishna and the chanting of His name (naam). Yet, the movement's institutional consolidation, geographical expansion, and literary enrichment owed as much to his principal disciple and designated successor, Madhavdeva, as to Sankardeva himself.

Despite Madhavdeva's acknowledged stature he is reverently called Mahapurusha alongside his guru-the scholarly literature has often subsumed his contributions within the broader Sankardeva narrative. As Chaliha (2006) observes, Madhavdeva was "in many respects complementary to his Guru," yet his independent creative and organizational genius warrants separate and sustained scholarly attention. This paper seeks to redress that imbalance by offering a comprehensive reassessment of Madhavdeva's life and multifaceted contributions to Assamese religion, literature, music, drama, and social organization.

The study is organized as follows : Section 2 examines the historiographical debate concerning Madhavdeva's birth date and early life; Section 3 analyses his transformative meeting with Sankardeva; Section 4 discusses his role as pontiff and the organizational challenges he faced; Section 5 provides a detailed survey of his literary works; Section 6 assesses his institutional contributions through the Satra and Namghar systems; Section 7 evaluates his philosophical and theological positions; and Section 8 considers his legacy and contemporary relevance.

2. Early Life and the Historiographical Debate on Birth Date :

2.1 Traditional Biographical Accounts :

Traditional hagiographical accounts, preserved in the guru-carita literature of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition, record that Madhavdeva was born in May 1489 at Leteku Pukhuri in the Narayanpur area of present-day Lakhimpur District, Assam (Neog 1980: 123). His father, Govindagiri Bhuyan, was a Kayastha descended from Hari Bhuyan-one of the Bhuyans who had accompanied Candivara, Sankardeva's forefather, in the fourteenth or fifteenth century as part of a population exchange between Dharmanarayana of Gauda and Durlabhnarayan of Kamarupa-Kamata. His mother, Manorama, belonged to the Baro-Bhuyan clan.

Madhavdeva's early life was marked by considerable adversity. His father, Govindagiri, had initially established his family at Banduka in Rangpur District (present-day Bangladesh) as a Majinder. After the death of his first wife, Govindagiri migrated to Bardowa in the Nagaon District of Assam, where he married Manorama. However, warfare between the Baro-Bhuyans and the Kacharis rendered the family homeless, and they were given shelter by Harasinga Bora, an officer of the Sutiya kingdom, at Letekupukhuri where Madhavdeva was born. Harisinga Bora arranged for Madhavdeva's early education at Narayanpur.

A subsequent famine forced the family to relocate again. A boatman named Ghagari Maji gave them shelter at Habung (a Chutia dependency) near Dhakuakhana in Lakhimpur district, where Madhavdeva's sister Urvashi was born. After approximately ten years at Habung, the family moved down the Brahmaputra River to Rauta-Tembuwani (present-day Bordowa), where Urvashi was married to Gayapani, a Bhuyan. Madhavdeva then accompanied his father back to Banduka, where he continued his education under Rajendra Adhyapak, becoming well-versed in the Tantras, Tarka-shastra, Puranas, and literature associated with Shaktism (Neog 1980: 123-125).

2.2 The Birth Date Controversy :

The traditional date of 1489 CE has been questioned by modern scholarship. Baniprasanna Misra, in *Deprovincialising Srimanta Sankaradeva* (2016), has argued that the conventional dating leads to chronological anomalies when correlated with recorded life events and family chronology. Misra draws upon a contemporaneous account describing Madhavdeva as approximately seventy-five years old at the Koch court in 1588-89, and on this basis proposes a revised birth year of c. 1514 CE (Misra 2016: 23-24). The traditional date of 1489 is derived from later biographical traditions associated with the guru-lore of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and is not securely attested in early contemporary sources (Misra 2016: 20-22). Seventeenth-century biographies provide limited chronological detail and often present Madhavdeva's life within a framework shaped by devotional narrative rather than historical reconstruction. As with Sankardeva, the gradual systematization of these traditions in later texts has been associated with attempts to establish a coherent lineage and fixed chronology for the movement (Misra 2016: 20-21).

The traditional date implies unusually large generational gaps and chronological overlaps that are difficult to reconcile with other biographical details (Misra 2016: 22-23). However, the date of 1489 continues to be widely cited in standard biographies, popular accounts, and official, commemorations. This paper acknowledges both dating traditions while noting that the revised chronology proposed by Misra offers a more consistent alignment of Madhavdeva's life events and family relationships. Some modern scholars have further suggested that Madhavdeva's meeting with Sankardeva may have occurred slightly later, possibly in the early 1530s, based on these revised chronological estimates (Misra 2016: 23-24).

3. The Transformative Meeting with Sankardeva:

The encounter between Madhavdeva and Srimanta Sankardeva constitutes one of the most celebrated events in Assamese religious history. Having grown into a staunch Shakta in his learning and practice, Madhavdeva, on learning of his mother's illness while at Banduka, resolved to sacrifice two goats to propitiate the goddess. However, his brother-in-law Gayapani—who had converted to Ekasarana Dharma and taken the name Ramadasa—refused to procure the goats for the sacrifice (Neog 1980: 110).

A prolonged theological debate ensued, and Ramadasa took Madhavdeva to meet Sankardeva to discuss the doctrinal conflicts. The debate lasted four and a half hours, at the conclusion of which Sankardeva uttered a sloka from the Bhagavata Purana:

यथा तरोर्मूलनिषेचनेन तृप्यत् तत्स्कन्धभुजोपशाखाः ।

प्राणोपहाराच्च यथेन्द्रियाणां तथैव सर्वहिणमच्युतेज्या ॥

(yathā taror mala-niṣecanena tṛpyanti tat-skandha-bhujopāśākhāḥ pranopahārāc ca yathendriyāṇām tathaiva sarvāṛhanam acyutejyā) (Srimad Bhagavatam (4.31.14))

This verse, which establishes the principle that just as watering the root of a tree nourishes all its branches and leaves, and just as feeding the senses nourishes the body, so too does worship of the Supreme Lord constitute worship of all beings, proved decisive. Madhavdeva was convinced, and he accepted Sankardeva as his guru (Neog 1980: 110).

bond between guru and disciple. After his conversion, Madhavdeva broke his betrothal and resolved never to marry, dedicating himself entirely to the propagation of the faith (Neog 1980: 110).

The significance of this event extends beyond the personal transformation of a single individual. Madhavdeva's conversion represented the accession of a formidable intellectual trained in Tantric philosophy, logic (tarka), and Sanskrit shastra to the Vaishnavite cause. His subsequent career would demonstrate that Sankardeva's recognition of his potential was prophetic.

4. Madhavdeva as Pontiff: Succession and Schism :

4.1 Appointment as Successor :

Sankardeva, before his death in February-March 1568, appointed Madhavdeva as the next spiritual successor in an intimate conversation. It is narrated in Sankardeva's biographies that when his son Ramananda approached him seeking spiritual instruction on his death bed, he directed him to Madhavdeva, upon whom all his spiritual strength and energy had devolved (Neog 1980: 120). This act of designation was, however, conducted almost privately—not all disciples were informed—sowing the seeds of future discord.

4.2 The Schism with Damodardeva :

In the first year of his pontifical tenure, a section of Vaishnavas headed by Damodardeva refused to acknowledge Madhavdeva's leadership. As Sarma (1966: 18) explains, "The main cause that led to this division was that Damodardeva, being one of the principal followers, naturally expected to succeed

Sankardeva to the pontifical position. But when his expectation was belied by the nomination of Madhavdeva, he found it difficult to regard Madhavdeva, an erstwhile colleague."

When called upon to explain his dissent, Damodardeva gave an unpleasant reply, and Madhavdeva severed all connections with him. This schism resulted in the formation of the Brahma-samhati order under Damodardeva, distinct from Madhavdeva's Purusa-samhati and the Nika-samhati associated with earlier disciples. The division, while painful, also had the unintended consequence of expanding the movement's organizational reach, as each order established its own network of Satras.

4.3 Pontifical Achievements :

Despite the initial challenge, Madhavdeva's tenure as pontiff proved remarkably productive. He took charge of proselytizing activities and cultural traditions, propagating the teachings of Sankardeva far and wide across the Brahmaputra Valley. His organizational acumen was demonstrated through the establishment of major Satras including the Barpeta Satra (c. 1538/1583) and the Sundaridiya Satra (c. 1570) which served as centres of religious instruction, cultural performance, and community governance. He appointed Mathura Das Burha Ata as the first Satradhikar of the Barpeta Satra, introducing a democratic system of governance that continues to function to this day.

5. Literary Contributions :

Madhavdeva's literary output is remarkable both in its volume and in its generic range. His works can be classified under several heads: theological and philosophical works, narrative renderings, plays and playlets, devotional lyrics, and compilations (Chaliha 2006; Neog 1998).

5.1 The Naam Ghosa : Magnum Opus :

Madhavdeva's magnum opus is the Naam Ghosa (also known as the Hazari Ghosa-the Book of a Thousand Couplets), which may be called the supreme achievement of the Sankardeva-ite school of bhakti (Chaliha 2006). Written over the period c. 1568-1596, the Naam Ghosa contains 1,001 couplets and represents the cream of the philosophical teachings of the Assam school. It is, therefore, held in the highest esteem by the Krishna-ite devotees of Assam.

Sankardeva is said to have asked Madhavdeva to write a work that would be "sweet as the plum but hard as the seed within it" a perfect description of the Naam Ghosa, which is simultaneously excellent poetry and profound exposition of philosophy (Chaliha 2006). Although the truths of this philosophy are scattered all through the Kirttana, Dasama, and other works of Sankardeva, the Naam Ghosa brings them into proper perspective and supplies a panoramic view within the range of a single volume.

Of the 1,001 verses, approximately one-third are directly derived from Sanskrit scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata Purana, while the remaining two-thirds represent Madhavdeva's own creative and philosophical synthesis (Chaliha 2006). On account of its use of various metrical measures, figures of speech, richness in thought and insight, and elegance in expression and style, the Naam Ghosa claims an exalted position in Assamese literature.

The Naam Ghosa is the record of religious experiences of a genuinely devoted soul and may also be regarded as an expression of spiritual craving of a whole generation stirred to a religious quest by diverse cross-currents and practices of the day. It embodies the teachings of his Guru, his own findings after careful study of the Shastras, and above all the truth he realized in his own heart (Chaliha 2006).

When, on the eve of his departure, his followers approached Madhavdeva to name a successor, the Saint directed them to his Naam Ghosa:

"Look, I have composed the Ghosa where I have recorded everything that I have got to say. Whoever reads and understands the Ghosa will verily find me there. I have repositied all my energy and knowledge in the Ghosa, and those who know how to seek me will certainly find me there."

This remarkable statement underscores the canonical authority Madhavdeva attributed to the work and the profound spiritual self-identification between author and text

The English translation, subtitled *The Divine Verses*, was rendered by Soroj Kumar Dutta in 1997. A scholarly paper by the Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR, 2021) explored the philosophical dimensions of the Naam Ghosa, its role in propagating moral and spiritual ideals, and its continuing its continuing relevance in contemporary Assamese society.

5.2 Bhakti Ratnavali :

The Bhakti Ratnavali is a lucid Assamese rendering of Vishnupuri's celebrated Sanskrit work of the same name. It is considered one of the four sacred books (*chari puthi*) of the Assam school of pure devotion to Krishna. The book lays special emphasis on Eka Sarana single-minded devotion to Lord Krishna and serves as a systematic exposition of the theology of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement

5.3 Janma Rahasya :

Madhavdeva's first literary work, *Janma Rahasya* (The Mystery of Birth), is a work of approximately 300 verses relating the story of the creation and destruction of the world, thereby establishing the omnipotence of God. It serves as an introductory philosophical treatise that sets the framework for the Neo-Vaishnavite cosmology.

5.4 Ramayana Adi Kanda :

Madhavdeva successfully translated the first book (Adi Kanda) of Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Assamese. The beauty of this rendering lies in its elegant verses and homely similes. The appropriate use of Assamese proverbs with a slight touch of humour gives the work the flavour of an original composition rather than a mere translation (Neog 1998). This contribution is significant for the development of Assamese prose and poetic diction.

5.5 Rajasuya Kavya :

The *Rajasuya Kavya* was composed with the *Sisupala Vadha* episode of the *Sabhaparva* of the *Mahabharata* as its basis. Written in an elegant style, this work is regarded as one of the finest poems of the Vaishnava age in Assam.

5.6 Naam Maalika :

The *Naam Maalika* is a metrical rendering of a Sanskrit anthology of the same name, which extols the merits of the holy naam (the Name of God). It reinforces the central theological principle of the *Ekasarana Dharma* that the chanting of God's name constitutes the highest form of worship constitutes the highest form of worship.

5.7 Guru Bhotima :

The *Guru Bhotima* is a long poem of praise dedicated to Sankardeva. It is a deeply personal work that expresses Madhavdeva's devotion to his guru and provides valuable biographical insights into the guru-disciple relationship that defined his spiritual life.

5.8 Contribution to the Kirtan Ghosa :

Madhavdeva also contributed a third chapter to the *Kirtan Ghosa* (titled *Dhyana Varnana*) after the two chapters composed by Sankardeva were lost. This act of completion demonstrates his role not merely as an independent author but as the custodian and continuator of his guru's literary and liturgical legacy.

6. Contributions to. Music and Drama :

6.1 Borgeets: Devotional Lyrics :

Madhavdeva composed 191 Borgeets (noble numbers) devotional songs fitted to classical ragas. Following the tradition established by Sankardeva, who composed approximately 221 Borgeets, Madhavdeva's compositions constitute a major portion of the principal corpus of devotional songs in Assamese literature (Rajan 2019). Most of Madhavdeva's Borgeets furnish lovely portraits of the childhood of Lord Krishna, revealing the eternal nature of the divine through the child Krishna's playful and endearing forms

The Borgeets of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva together form the foundation of Assam's classical music tradition. In 2019, The Hindu raised the question of whether Borgeets should be recognized as a classical art form a testament to their enduring musical sophistication and cultural significance (Rajan 2019). Madhavdeva's Borgeets are distinguished from Sankardeva's by their more intimate, lyrical quality, focusing particularly on the vatsalya rasa (the sentiment of parental love) in depicting the mother Yashoda's relationship with the child Krishna.

6.2 Jhumura Plays and Ankiya Naat Tradition :

Madhavdeva wrote nine dramatic works, primarily depicting the pranks of child Krishna. His most celebrated drama is Arjun Bhanjana (also known as Dadhi Mathana), a full-length Ankiya Naat in the tradition established by Sankardeva. The remaining eight plays-Coradhara, Pimpura Gucova, Bhumi Letova, Bhojana Bihara, and others are classified as Jhumuras (playlets) shorter, more focused dramatic performances (Neog 1998: 58).

The Jhumura form represents Madhavdeva's distinctive contribution to the Assamese dramatic tradition. While Sankardeva's Ankiya Naat was a full-length one-act play combining dialogue, song, dance, and narration, the Jhumura was a more compact form that could be performed within the limited space and time of the Namghar. This practical innovation made theatrical performance accessible to a wider range of communities and occasions, thereby democratizing the cultural dimensions of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

7. Institutional Contributions: Satra and Namghar :

7.1 The Barpeta Satra :

The Barpeta Satra (also known as the Barpeta Kirtanghar), established by Madhavdeva, is one of the most prominent and influential Satras in Assam. According to various sources, it was founded in approximately 1538 CE (some accounts place it at 1583 CE). Madhavdeva stayed at the Barpeta Satra for eight years, during which he composed many of his finest literary works (Barpeta Satra Organization).

Madhavdeva appointed Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata as the first Satradhikar of the Barpeta Satra, and introduced a democratic system of governance that continues to function effectively. This system involves community participation in decision-making, rotating responsibilities, and collective management of the Satra's resources-anticipating by centuries the principles of participatory governance that modern institutions aspire to.

The Barpeta Satra has served not merely as a religious centre but as a cultural repository preserving Bhaona (traditional theatre), Sattriya dance, Borgeet, and devotional music. Its influence on the surrounding community has been profound, devotional music. Its influence on the surrounding community has been profound, shaping the social, economic, and artistic life of the Barpeta district.

7.2 The Sundaridiya Satra :

The Sundaridiya Satra, established by Madhavdeva in approximately 1570 CE near Barpeta town, represents another major institutional achievement. Madhavdeva stayed at this Satra for approximately fourteen years after establishing it, making it a centre for intensive literary production and community organization (Tour My India sources).

7.3 Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar :

The Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar in Jorhat district, established by Madhavdeva in 1528 (1450 Saka), stands as a remarkable testament to his spiritual legacy. According to tradition, Madhavdeva kindled an earthen lamp at this Namghar which, by the account of the managing committee, has been burning continuously since then a powerful symbol of the enduring vitality of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition.

7.4 The Namghar as Socio-Religious Institution :

The Namghar (prayer house), conceived by Sankardeva and developed by Madhavdeva and other disciples, transcends its religious origin to serve as a comprehensive socio-cultural institution. Under Madhavdeva's leadership, the Namghar became the centre of village life a place for daily prayer, community decision-making, cultural performance, dispute resolution, and education. As recent scholarship has demonstrated (ResearchGate 2026), the Namghar plays a crucial role in preserving indigenous art forms and perpetuating cultural identity. The institution represents a unique synthesis of the sacred and the civic, embodying the Neo-Vaishnavite vision of religion as an integrated way of life rather than a compartmentalized sphere of existence.

8. Philosophical and Theological Contributions :

Madhavdeva's philosophical contributions, while grounded in Sankardeva's foundational teachings, exhibit distinctive emphases and elaborations. The Naam Ghosa provides the most systematic exposition of his theological position, which may be summarized under several key principles:

8.1 Eka Sarana (Single Refuge) :

The central theological principle of the Ekasarana Dharma is the absolute surrender to one God-Lord Krishna-through the chanting of His name. Madhavdeva's works reinforce this principle with particular rigour, arguing that all other forms of religious practice-ritual sacrifice, meditation on formless Brahman, propitiation of lesser deities are subordinate to and find their fulfilment in the single-minded devotion (bhakti) to Krishna.

8.2 The Primacy of Naam :

Madhavdeva placed particular emphasis on the power and efficacy of the naam (the Name of God). The Naam Ghosa and Naam Maalika are both extended meditations on the theological significance of naam-kirttan (the chanting of God's name). In Madhavdeva's theology, the Name is not merely a symbol or representation of God-it is God Himself in sonic form. This position aligns the Ekasarana Dharma with broader Bhakti movement theology across India while maintaining its distinctive Assamese character.

8.3 Rejection of Animal Sacrifice :

Madhavdeva's own conversion from Shaktism-which involved ritual animal sacrifice to Vaishnavism gave personal authority to his theological rejection of animal sacrifice. This position was not merely doctrinal but had profound social implications, as it challenged the priestly class that derived its authority from sacrificial rituals and the caste hierarchies they reinforced.

8.4 Social Equality :

The Ekasarana Dharma, as propagated by both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, explicitly rejected caste dis-

tinctions within the community of devotees. The Namghar, where all devotees sat together regardless of caste, represented a radical departure from the hierarchical social order of medieval Assam. Madhavdeva's leadership in institutionalizing this practice through the Satra and Namghar systems gave it a permanence that transcended the charisma of any single individual.

9. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance :

Madhavdeva passed away in 1596 at Bhela Sattrā in Koch Bihar (present-day Cooch Behar). More than four centuries after his death, his legacy continues to shape Assam's spiritual, cultural, and social life in multiple dimensions.

9.1 Literary and Cultural Legacy :

The Naam Ghosa remains a living text, chanted daily in Namghars across Assam. The Borgeets composed by Madhavdeva continue to be performed as part of Sattriya dance and devotional practice-Sattriya was recognized as a classical dance form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2000, acknowledging the artistic tradition that Madhavdeva helped establish. The Jhumura plays continue to be performed as part of the Bhaona tradition in rural Assam.

9.2 Institutional Legacy :

The Satra institutions founded or consolidated by Madhavdeva the Barpeta Satra, Sundaridiya Satra, Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar, and others continue to function as centres of religious, cultural, and community life. The democratic governance system introduced at the Barpeta Satra has survived for over four centuries, offering a model of participatory community management.

9.3 Identity Formation :

Recent scholarship has highlighted the role of the Namghar-and by extension, Madhavdeva's institutional contributions in Assamese identity formation (Academia 2025). The Namghar serves as a site where communal identity is constructed, reinforced, and transmitted across generations. In an era of globalization and cultural homogenization, Madhavdeva's institutions represent a locally rooted yet inclusive model of community organization.

9.4 Contemporary Commemoration :

The Government of Assam observes Madhavdeva's Tirubhav Tithi (death anniversary) as an official holiday, and his Abirbhav Tithi (birth anniversary) is celebrated across the state with cultural programmes, devotional performances, and scholarly discourses. In 2026, as Assam observed his Abirbhav Tithi, scholars and cultural enthusiasts emphasized the importance of introducing younger generations to his life and works (India Today NE, 2026).

10. Conclusion :

This paper has sought to establish that Madhavdeva's contributions to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam are both distinctive and indispensable. While his relationship with Sankardeva-as disciple, prana bandhava, and designated successor-defined the trajectory of his spiritual life, his own creative and organizational achievements constitute an autonomous and substantial body of work.

The Naam Ghosa stands as one of the most accomplished works of devotional literature in any Indian language-a text that synthesizes philosophy, theology, and poetry with remarkable unity of vision. His 191 Borgeets enriched the Assamese musical tradition with a lyrical intimacy that complements Sankardeva's more majestic compositions. His Jhumura plays made the dramatic dimension of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement accessible to communities across Assam. His institutional innovations the Barpeta Satra, the

Sundaridiya Satra, the Dhekiakhwa Bornamghar, and the democratic governance system he introduced gave the movement an organizational permanence that outlasted any single leader.

Perhaps most significantly, Madhavdeva's life exemplifies the transformative power of the guru-disciple relationship in the Indian spiritual tradition. His conversion from Shaktism to Vaishnavism, his unwavering devotion to Sankaradeva, and his decades of service to the community demonstrate that the Neo-Vaishnavite movement was not merely a doctrinal system but a lived experience of spiritual transformation. As Assam continues to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity, Madhavdeva's legacy of devotion, equality, cultural creativity, and institutional innovation-remains a vital resource.

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