

Economic Perspectives in the Teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Their Contemporary Relevance

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INTRODUCTION

Srimanta Sankaradeva, the great Vaishnavite saint, reformer, and cultural architect of Assam, is primarily celebrated for his spiritual philosophy, literary genius, and socio-religious reforms. However, embedded within his Neo-Vaishnavite ideology lies a consistent set of economic thoughts that significantly influenced the socio-economic structure of medieval Assam. Though Sankaradeva did not articulate economic theories in the modern disciplinary sense, his ideas on livelihood, production, distribution, and social welfare were deeply interwoven with his religious and ethical teachings. The economic vision of Srimanta Sankaradeva was rooted in the principles of equality, simplicity, and collective welfare. Through the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, he sought to dismantle rigid caste hierarchies and promote dignity of labour, thereby encouraging productive participation of all sections of society. His emphasis on honest labour, moderation in consumption, and ethical conduct in economic life reflects a moral economy that prioritized social harmony over material accumulation. These ideas find expression in his literary works such as the Kirtan Ghosa, Bhagavata, and Ankia Naat, where greed, exploitation, and social inequality are subtly critiqued.

The institution like Namghar and Satra, established under the guidance of Srimanta Sankaradeva, functioned not only as spiritual and cultural centers but also as hubs of economic cooperation. These institutions promoted community farming, collective resource management, artisanal production, and redistribution of surplus for social welfare. By fostering self-reliance and mutual aid, Sankaradeva's economic thought contributed to a sustainable and inclusive rural economy in medieval Assam. The economic thoughts of Srimanta Sankaradeva reflect a value-based approach that integrates economic activity with ethical responsibility and social justice. His ideas remain relevant in contemporary discussions on inclusive development, sustainable livelihoods, and human-centered economic models. Understanding Srimanta Sankaradeva's economic philosophy thus offers valuable insights into indigenous economic thinking and its relevance for addressing modern socio-economic challenges.

Objectives

The Study was conducted keeping certain objectives in view. These objectives are-

1. To study about Sankaradeva's view on different economic aspects.
2. To show how Sankaradeva's economic thought impacted on trade and commerce and agricultural economy.
3. To analyze the relevance of Sankaradeva's economic thoughts in present day context.

Review of Related Literature

Although a number of studies have been done in Sankaradeva and his contributions in different fields but little study is done regarding Sankaradeva's socio-economic aspects. Scholars now have started to examine his socio-economic ideas, especially in terms of social equity, community welfare, and economic ethics. They argue that Sankaradeva's philosophy directly speaks to economic ethics by emphasizing fairness, dignity and wellbeing. Goswami (2010) points out that Sankaradeva encouraged self-sufficiency among peasants and common people through collective labour and mutual support. Baruah (2007) discusses how dismantling caste barriers had socio-economic implication- providing equal access to work, education and community participation. Chetia (2012) emphasizes the moral basis of Sankaradeva's economics in caring for the needy, rejecting greed, and promoting honest livelihood. Talukdar (2016) explains that the Satras and Namghars became centers of collective labour, sharing of resources, and mutual training in skill. Borkakati (2018) describes how the institutions functions as socio-economic networks where community members supported each other's needs like food, shelter and works, resembling early forms of cooperative economics. Hazarika (2014) discusses Sankaradeva's emphasis on ethics in work, humane economic relationship, and responsible use of resources. Das (2015) draws similarity between Sankaradeva's ideas on simplicity, self-reliance and Gandhian ideas of gram-swaraj. Bordoloi (2020) compares Sankaradeva and Buddhist economic values in stressing non-violence, minimalism, and social welfare. These comparative analyses show how Sankaradeva's economic ideas resonate with broader Indian ethical economic thoughts.

The literature on Srimanta Sankaradeva's economic philosophy reflects a growing scholarly interest in understanding his socio-economic thought beyond spiritual teachings. While most works emphasize egalitarian values, community cooperation and ethical economics, the area lacks a fully articulated theoretical model. Future research can be undertaken to integrate Sankaradeva's idea into broader economic discourse, compare them with classical economic theories and explore their relevance to contemporary development challenges.

Methodology

Descriptive method is used to fulfill the objectives of the paper. Data and information are collected from secondary sources. For this, Sankaradeva's own compositions are searched. Information is also extracted from Srimad Bhagavata, Charit Puthis, books and articles in journals. Web materials are also studied for collecting information.

Discussion

Sankaradeva expressed his views on various economic aspects which have been recorded casually in his work. Those views had some special significance. In this section an attempt is made to elaborate the economic practices of Sankaradeva and the relevance of Sankaradeva's economic thought in present time. Sankaradeva's had enormous literary compositions and his economic views are reflected in his compositions. Some important of them are-

Sankaradeva's view on Money and Wealth

Srimanta Sankaradeva regarded money and material wealth as instrumental, not ultimate. Wealth was acceptable only when it supported righteous living (dharma) and devotion (bhakti). According to him, excessive attachment to wealth diverts human beings from spiritual and ethical pursuits. Sankaradeva's

writings repeatedly warn against greed, which he considered one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual and social well-being. In his writings-

“ji lakhmita asha kori sadaye akula mona
tehu maha chanchala mona”¹

For him, inner wealth such as devotion, knowledge, and moral integrity was superior to material riches. If a person only engaged himself in accumulating wealth and refrain from consumption or donation he would invite only sufferings.

Sankaradeva’s view on Division of Income

Srimanta Sankaradeva’s vision of income division was not mathematical but ethical and functional. He emphasized balanced allocation of income for personal sustenance, social responsibility, and spiritual upliftment. His thoughts continue to offer valuable insights into equitable income distribution rooted in morality and community welfare. Through his writing Sankaradeva advised that total income earned by a person should be divided into five equal parts to perform five type of duties, namely religious or social welfare, personal consumption, re-investment to increase wealth in future, acquiring knowledge r personality development and saving for future generation.

Sankaradeva’s View on Livelihood

Sankaradeva held a holistic view of livelihood that integrated spiritual devotion with economic self-sufficiency, dignity of labour and cooperation. He promoted agriculture, weaving and other local sustainable industries, making the satras as the centres of economic activity. He also advocated that everybody must get a meaningful livelihood. A person would be able to perform his economic, social and religious obligations only if he has an assured income. However, Sankaradeva emphasized that one should not employ dishonest tactics to earn income. He discarded all livelihoods involved in cruelty, violence or killing of animals and birds, or destroying the nature.

Sankaradeva’s view on Consumption and Saving

Srimanta Sankaradeva did not oppose saving, but he rejected hoarding motivated by fear, greed, or ego. Saving was acceptable when it served ethical purposes, such as meeting future necessities, supporting family responsibilities, or helping others during times of need. Srimanta Sankaradeva’s view on consumption and saving promotes a balanced economic ethic: consume what is necessary, save what is meaningful, and share what is surplus. According to him, the best utilization of one’s hard earned money is sharing consumption and making donation. Similarly, he emphasized to save a part of income so that the future generation would not suffer from capital storage. In his writings-

‘nija bharyya putraka banchiya jitu nare
kore anna byanjana bhojana ekeoeware
.....
yamodute kore satri haraive chetana’²

Srimanta Sankaradeva on Consumer Awareness

Srimanta Sankaradeva’s vision of consumer awareness centers on moral discernment, simplicity, and social responsibility. He encourages individuals to consume thoughtfully, resist greed and illusion, and recognize the ethical and spiritual dimensions of economic life. His ideas remain relevant today in

promoting responsible, sustainable, and value-based consumption. Srimanta Sankaradeva believed that the purchasing behavior of a person affects his economic condition. Unnecessary and un-thoughtful buying may lead a person to insolvency. Similarly, if a buyer is not careful in judging the quality of products he may be deceived by the shopkeepers. Through his writings Sankaradeva tried to create awareness among the customers that in the market there may be numerous shops and many commodities but one must be very careful before purchasing.

‘bharata hatata ache aneka dukani
nicini kinile punu milibe bighini’³

Srimanta Sankaradeva and Sustainable Development

Srimanta Sankaradeva viewed nature as part of the divine order. His devotional philosophy encouraged respect for all forms of life, as they are creations of God (Vishnu/Krishna). This outlook discourages irresponsible exploitation of natural resources and supports a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. Through Eka-Sarana Naam Dharma, Sankaradeva promoted equality across caste and class. According to him, human actions should not harm future generations. By discouraging greed and encouraging ethical restraint, he supported an early notion of intergenerational equity, a key pillar of sustainable development. In his writings-

‘jata lata taru trina kahako nedekha bhinna
harira sarira buli mane
sabako pranama kari sarbakshyane nama smare
krishna bine anaka najane’⁴

Sankaradeva expressed that one should not destroy the nature or kill other animals for self interest.

‘yata jiva jangama kita patangama
aga naga jaga teri kaya
sabakahu mari purata uhi udara
nahi karatu bhuta daya’⁵

One should pay respect to all living beings on the earth as all are part of God and so he expresses it as-

‘kukura srigala gaddarbharo atamarama
janiya savako pari kariba pranama’⁶

Impact on Trade, Commerce and Agricultural Economy

Srimanta Sankaradeva encouraged trade and commerce. It is evident from the fact that his chief disciple Madhabdeva was closely related to trade. Many of his followers were also engaged in his trade and commerce. Brass and Bell Metal industry was promoted by Sankaradeva’s introduction of different kinds of Tal (cymbals), which were universally used in Nam-Kirttana by his followers. From the economic point of view the development of the Brass and Bell Metal industry was a very important event. Special kinds of utensils such as ban-kahi, bera-kanhi, dugdugi-lota made of silver, bata, sarai, usually with a stand and a dome shaped cover at the top, made of bell metal, tamar kalah, ghati, thal and many more were made by professional craftsmen (Pathak, 2004, 192). It helped the improvement of the industry of the society during that period.

During the period of 16th century, the economy of Assam was mainly agrarian. “From the hagiographies it is found that Sankaradeva involved in cultivation and encouraged others to do the same” (Pathak, (ed), 2004, 192). “Sankaradeva’s religious activities increased the demand for indigenous agricultural commodities. He undertakes any project to control floods. He encouraged the commercialization of agricultural commodities. He also gave importance to animal husbandry” (Sarma, 1989, 143). Thus the impacts of present religious activities of Sankaradeva helped to improve the agricultural economy of Assam. During the period of Sankaradeva, when he was the Bhuyan chief of Bardowa, under the Ahom kingdom, he came to know about the miseries of thousands of farmers of many villages whose agricultural crops were washed every year by the Tembuvani rivulet which had its confluence into the Brahmaputra. Sankaradeva organized the villagers, gave them necessary guidance to collect all the required goods and, under his personal supervisions, got the mouth of the rivulet falling into the big river plugged, thereby saving thousands of bighas of paddy land. Sankaradeva also introduced the unique system of distributing Prasada. The Prasada consists of pulses, green-gram etc. and available seasonal fruits, ginger, betel leaves, coconut, sugarcane etc. Since each family had their homestead where these types of crops were grown, Sankaradeva used it for social welfare.

Relevance of Sankaradeva’s Economic Ideas in Present day Context

The ideas, thoughts and contributions of Srimanta Sankaradeva play a vital role towards the economic condition of our society in present day context. The institution created by Srimanta Sankaradeva has provided employment to thousands of people through various ways such as promoting tourism industry, as millions of visitors gather the Than or Satra and the Namghar on the occasions like the Ras festival, Bhaona, janmotsav and the birth anniversary of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and other saints and the youths are now earning their livelihood from these unique institutions. Although he did not formulate a structured economic theory, his teachings under the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma provide enduring economic insights that remain highly relevant in the contemporary world marked by inequality, consumerism, and environmental stress.

One of the most significant aspects of Sankaradeva’s economic thought is his emphasis on ethical earning and restrained consumption. He advocated honest labor and discouraged greed, luxury, and wasteful expenditure. In today’s context of overconsumption and material excess, his ideal of simple living and high thinking aligns closely with sustainable consumption practices and the global movement towards responsible lifestyles.

Sankaradeva also stressed the social responsibility of wealth. Income, in his view, was not meant for personal enjoyment alone but should be shared for community welfare. The institutional framework of Namghars and Satras functioned as centers of collective resource pooling, charity, education, and social support. This principle resonates with modern ideas of inclusive growth, social security, and corporate social responsibility.

Another enduring contribution is his strong stand against social and economic discrimination. By rejecting caste hierarchy and welcoming people from all sections of society into the Bhakti fold, Sankaradeva promoted social mobility and economic inclusion. In the present era, where income inequality and social exclusion persist, his egalitarian philosophy offers a moral foundation for inclusive development policies.

Sankaradeva’s thought also carries relevance in the area of human development. He prioritized moral education, cultural awareness, and spiritual well-being over mere material accumulation. Contemporary

development discourse increasingly recognizes that economic growth without ethical and human values leads to social imbalance—a concern Sankaradeva addressed centuries ago. In an age facing environmental degradation, market-driven excess, and widening economic disparities, Sankaradeva's economic ideas advocate a balanced development model that harmonizes material progress with moral responsibility, social justice, and sustainability. His vision thus remains profoundly relevant for shaping a humane and inclusive economic order in the present day.

Conclusion

Srimanta Sankaradeva's economic idea and thoughts reveal a value-based framework grounded in ethical living, social harmony, moderation in consumption, and collective welfare. His emphasis on moral economy, equitable distribution, and community-oriented development offers meaningful insights for addressing contemporary challenges such as inequality, consumerism, and unsustainable growth. Revisiting Sankaradeva's ideas in the present context not only enriches indigenous economic thought but also provides alternative perspectives for building an inclusive, humane, and sustainable development paradigm rooted in cultural wisdom and social responsibility.

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6. ¹ Bhagavata , 10th Canto, vs. 127.
7. ² Bhagavata , 3rd Canto, vs. 267.
8. ³ Borgita by Srimanta Sankaradeva
9. ⁴ Nimi Nava Sidha Sambad, Verse-67
10. ⁵ Borgita by Srimanta Sankaradeva
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