

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEV'S *EKAŚARAṆA DHARMA* AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Sudeshna Das and Payel Dutta Chowdhury*

Abstract

Ethics and religion share a symbiotic relationship, although both can exist independently of each other. The ethical dimensions intertwined with religious discourse are dynamic, prompting an exploration of their current associations and contemporary relevance. This paper examines the ethical foundations of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*, propagated by Srimanta Sankardev, a well-known revered saint-scholar from 15th-16th century Assam. The argument posits that an ethical interface between individuals and an inclusive religion serves as a potent tool for contemporary sustenance. The paper also examines the functioning of the *sattras* (monasteries) and the *namghars* (prayer houses) which propagated the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*, alongside an analysis of Sankardev's artistic contributions stemming from the movement. This work further scrutinizes Sankardev's religious philosophy, centered on fostering an all-inclusive society, to ascertain if the foundational principles of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* can effectively address the conflicts prevalent in today's digital world.

Keywords: Koch Dynasty, *sattra*, *namghar*, *Mahāpūrūṣia*, *Bhāḡavatam*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiyā Naat*, *Bhāonā*, *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*.

* **Dr. Sudeshna Das** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Studies at the School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, REVA University. She is specialized in the field of development communication, participatory communication, media and culture, and film studies.

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury is an independent researcher and a creative writer. She specializes in Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, and Film Studies. She takes active interest in the study of folk culture and literature from India's northeast region.

1. Introduction

Ethics has been an integral part of most religions. Ethical component in religions has served as a guiding force to individuals to choose the right path and keep away from the wrong. However, both can exist independently of each other and hence, as a matter of historical fact, it is true that “religion may be non-ethical and ethics non-religious” (Everett 480). Santiago Sia takes this debate to a philosophical level and argue that “we all have a certain concept of good which is more fundamental to any belief in God and which, therefore, shows that we can judge something to be morally good without necessarily bringing in theistic considerations” (705). These debates highlight differences in perspectives, but the fact remains that ethics and religion have been juxtaposed since time immemorial. To prove this point, George Wm. Knox takes the examples of “religions which go back to a historical founder – Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity” and opines that “these religions unite ethics with religion in a fashion which is comparatively unknown in the religions which cannot thus be traced back to great teachers” (307). This is an interesting viewpoint which highlights the role of *gurus* or *ācāryas* (spiritual teachers) in facilitating ethics in religious societies.

In ancient Hindu texts, ethics is termed as *nītiśāstra*. Ethical subjects and questions have never been static; they have evolved continuously and have been debated by various schools of Hinduism. In the course of time, certain ethical principles have been changed, replaced, or merged with the evolution of religious societies. Therefore, it becomes imperative to re-view the relationship between ethics and religious societies to examine the status of such association and understand its contemporary relevance. In this context, this paper will study the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* (lit. Shelter in One Religion), rooted in the *Bhāgavata Puraṇa*, propagated by Srimanta Sankardev, the well-known saint-scholar from Assam of the 15th-16th century. The study will examine the ethical foundation of his religious philosophy founded upon *bhakti* (devotion) through *śravaṇa* (congregational listening) and *kīrtana* (singing the name and deeds of the Almighty). The study will also analyze the functioning of the

sattras (monasteries) and the *namghars* (prayer houses) which propagated the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*. The paper aims at exploring the ethical base of the *Ekaśaraṇa* religious philosophy through the artistic creations that emanated from the movement – *Borgeet* (lyrical songs), *Ankiyâ Naat* and *Bhāonā* (one-act plays), and *Sattriya Nr̥tya* (classical dance) – to aid in solving modern-day problems. The study will further explore the religious philosophy of Sankardev to examine how it can be used to overcome *vimarda* (conflict), *bheda* (inequality), and *dveṣa* (hatred), arising out of the materialistic and consumerist culture akin to *māyā* and *ajñāna* of today’s time. It will investigate if *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* can address issues of technological knowledge gap, and problems of the digital era, like cyber bullying and online hatred, which is detrimental to the creation of an all-inclusive society. The hypothesis of the study is that the presence of an ethical interface between the individual and an inclusive religion, such as the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* is the most potential tool for sustenance of living beings in today’s world.

1.1 Ethics and Religion – The Indian Perspective

The notion of ‘ethics’ has been employed in various contexts and have multitudinal perspectives in terms of what it means when applied in varied circumstances. Often the word ‘ethics’ is used synonymously with the word ‘morality’. Morality sets standards for choices of action; ethics analyzes those standards of choices. In this context, ethics is known as the science of moral norms or moral philosophy. Singer defines ethics as the scientific way of reasoning about how people ought to live and act (3-4). Ethics can also be termed as a set of rules that can guide the actions of a society. Ethics can act as the guiding principle for the foundation of society’s conception of right and wrong.

The relevance of ethics to society and human life, though imperative, must be based on practical foundations. First and foremost, society is a dynamic phenomenon in a constant state of flux and in keeping with changing times, ethics also needs to change to remain relevant with the changing times and places. But again, ethics remains significant as it acts as the guiding philosophy of good and bad imbibing people with its assurance

of being in the right or wrong. Human life is a journey of joys and sorrows because of the moral code which acts as an indicator of their spiritual ways. The Indian knowledge tradition indicates that the origin of ethics lies in its religious and philosophical thinking.

Ancient history of India has central concepts of ethics encompassed in one of the revered knowledge texts renowned all over the world called *Rgveda*. In the Vedic tradition, the *Rgveda* professes the idea of *ṛta* which signifies an all-pervasive cosmic order. *Ṛta* originating from the root 'ri' means 'to move' and can be translated as divine law or natural law. *Ṛta* signifies that the universe is a natural structure consisting of environmental systems with all kinds of life with inherent good. The eternal harmony of cosmic order is *Ṛta*. The construction, repair, or annihilation is through the manifesting of the cosmic intellect which represents the method of *Ṛta*. It stands for the basic and integral law of nature and ordains mankind's natural laws of birth, development, and degradation.

The term *Dharma* originating from 'Dhri' means 'to keep'. It is a multifaceted term which does not merely stand for religion but encompasses ideas of duty, obligation, and righteousness. The cornerstone of all human moral and ethical conduct is *dharma*. Adhering to *dharma* leads to a harmonious and fulfilling life, both in this world and the next. *Dharma* is seen as a means to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death. By fulfilling one's *dharma* and living a righteous life, individuals can transcend their earthly limitations and attain spiritual enlightenment. *Dharma* is often associated with *ṛta*, the cosmic order that governs the universe. Living in accordance with *dharma* is seen as aligning oneself with this cosmic order, bringing harmony and balance to one's life. Through this association, the transcendental realm of *Prakṛti* and the earthly world of *Puruṣa* achieves a sense of equilibrium. Whenever this symmetry is jeopardized, it results in disorder and sufferings in society. Therefore, in the Indian way of life, *ṛta* sets the foundation for *dharma*. The concept of *dharma* in Hinduism delves into the realm of a person's responsibility and individual paths linked to their caste and stages of life. This religious

definition contrasts with *dharma* that is not fixated on a set of rules that apply to everyone, but rather a dynamic and evolving set of principles that guide an individual’s behaviour. Srimanta Sankardev’s *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* rejected the Hindu religious definition of *dharma* at a time when the Assamese society was divided based on caste and class, causing several difficulties to the indigenous people and the downtrodden sections of the society. *Ekaśaraṇa* philosophy propounded a *dharma* not bound to any specific faith and encouraged the fostering of human well-being and strengthened connections across diverse communities.

1.2 The 16th Century Koch Dynasty and the *Varṇāśrama* System

In the beginning of the 16th century, the Koch king, Biswa Singha, established his dynasty in the Kamata kingdom. The Koches, before their Hinduization, were a Tibeto-Burman speaking tribe, who were despised as low caste. In the 16th century, they showed keen interest in Brahminical Hinduism to uplift their social position. Thus, the king Biswa Singha, who was of indigenous origin, embraced Hinduism and claimed Kshatriya status. While Biswa Singha promoted Brahminism to acquire support, some of the Brahmins of his kingdom sought royal patronage. Very soon, stories of the divine birth of Biswa Singha “recorded in the *Darrang Rājvoamśavali*” as “born out of the union of Lord Siva and his mortal mother Hira, an incarnation of goddess Bhagwati” (Sheikh 250) were circulated by the Brahmins. Biswa Singha sent his two sons, Nara Narayan and Sukladhvaj, to Banaras to receive education from the well-known Sanskrit scholar and saint, Brahmanānda. In order to show his inclination towards Hinduism and the Sanskritization of the royal family, Biswa Singha gave upper hand to the Brahmins, provided them with tax-free land, and with several other privileges. He also went to the extent of bringing learned Brahmins from various places, such as Mithila, Banaras, Kanauj, and Srikshetra (Puri) to his kingdom to perform Brahminical rituals.

When Nara Narayan succeeded the throne, it was no surprise that his sympathies too lay with Hindu rituals and customs because of his educational background. He restored the Kamakhya temple which had been destroyed by the

Mohammedans and keeping in line with the ritualistic tradition, “a hundred and forty men were sacrificed, their heads being offered to the goddess on copper salvers” (Eliot 1164) on the occasion of the temple’s consecration. Taking his father’s legacy forward, Nara Narayan, introduced the *varṇāśrama* or the four-fold caste system in Koch Behar through Siddhantavagisa, a Brahmin priest. The *varṇāśrama* is a hierarchical caste system which ranks four *varṇas* – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras – in conjunction with their occupations and duties. Highlighting the complex system of *varṇa* and its evolution, Romila Thapar points out –

The bi-polarity of purity and pollution remained an important characteristic of the classification by *varṇa*, but this classification was of a more theoretical kind involving initially four (*brahman*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, and *sudra*) and subsequently five (with the addition of the *pancama* or 'untouchable') groups in society, and eventually became more closely related to ritual than to social status. *Jati* slowly became the gauge of a more precise assessment of the socio-economic status of a group, but the criteria of status continued to include ritual status (*varṇa*) (120).

This system was considered unethical by many people and was in direct conflict with the indigenous belief system of the Koch and the other tribal communities of the Koch-Kamata kingdom. Due to continuous protests by these communities against the religious customs of the Hindus and the unethical caste hierarchy, the king “passed a decree that the people inhabited in western part of his kingdom may worship their own deities according to their own ways and even by their own priest, while the eastern part was allowed to follow the rites and rituals of the Hindus” (Adhikary 30). Nara Narayan also protected the rising Vaishnava sects and did not impose Hinduism on them. Therefore, the upper echelon of the Koch society started following the religious practices and caste hierarchy under the impact of Brahminical Hinduism although the lower strata of the society was slow to embrace it.

It is during the event of this transformation in the Assamese society that we see the advent of Srimanta Sankardev, who along with his two disciples, Madhabdev and Damodardev, in the mid-16th century, brought about a cultural renaissance

through his ethical religious philosophies and practices. No doubt, the influence of Sankardev accelerated the Sanskritization of the Koch royal family but his *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*, based primarily on ethical principles, propounded a casteless and classless society, urging people to embrace inclusivity in their way of life. The Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* had a great influence on the religious philosophy of Sankardev. Considered as an important text in Vaishnavism, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* competes with that of the Vedas, and gives utmost importance to *bhakti* (devotion), which in turn is believed to lead to *ātma-bodha* (self-knowledge), *mokṣa* (salvation), and *ānanda* (bliss). The *Bhāgavata* of Srimanta Sankardev, written in the Assamese language, is regarded as the central religious text of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*. It is not a verbatim translation of the original text, but rather a transcreation, keeping the local milieu intact. The text was adapted for the Assamese people and thus mention of Assamese tribes and the local flora and fauna can be found. This book also talks about a new social order, fostering equality and fraternity among all castes, classes, and religious groups, which contrasts with the *varṇāśrama* practice mentioned in the Sanskrit tradition. Sankardev’s *Gunamālā*, a scripture written at the request of the Koch king Nara Narayan in 1552, manages to capture the essence of the *Bhāgavata* and serves two purposes – one, to show the season in all its splendour and second, to demonstrate how the seasons serve as a backdrop to arouse devotional feeling toward Sri Kṛṣṇa. Two other books – *Kīrtan Ghoxa* by Sankardev and *Naam Ghoxa* by Madhabdev – are used for congregational singing by the devotees, promoting similar concepts of an ethical society devoid of human-made divisions.

2. Ethics as the Foundation for *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*

The emergence of Sankardev was at a time when Assam was divided among the Bhuyans, Ahoms, Koches, Kacharis, Jaintias, Chutias, and Magas. There were continuous feuds among the Bhuyan aristocratic members and also against the king, Nara Narayan. The period also witnessed continuous Muslim invasions from Bengal which disrupted the native cultural practices of Assam. The frequent Nara invasions from Upper

Burma similarly hindered the progress of the region. During the 15th-16th century, the ancient Kamrupa was predominated by Śaktism and Tantrism. Charles N.E. Eliot is of the opinion that “the Śaktist form of worship originated in Bengal and Assam” and contends that “it is true that a goddess who requires to be propitiated with human victims has temples in most parts of India, but Śaktism in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north-east corner, at least has its head-quarters there” (1158). In this context, it is to be noted that the famous Kamakhya temple was the hub of tantric culture. The royal courts were also influenced by the tantric tradition and human sacrifices were annually offered to the tutelary goddess, *Kecaikhati* (lit. eater of raw meat), of the Chutia kingdom and the Dimasa kingdom. This bloodthirsty deity was worshipped among all the hill tribes of the region as well as by the Hindu people of some parts of Assam. The practice of human sacrifices to *Kecaikhati* continued even after the Ahoms took over the Chutia kingdom in 1523 until the Ahom king, Suhitpanghaa (also known as Gaurinath Singha) banned it.

Srimanta Sankardev's *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*, a neo-Vaiṣṇavite monolithic religion, primarily contested the unethical *varṇāśrama* system prevalent in the 16th century Assamese society. His religious philosophy was completely different from the earlier system based on *tantric* tradition as well as Vedic ritualism which had gained primacy. Such ritualistic worship was without a proper understanding or appreciation of the activities, and a mere passive following of customs. In this context, Balbir Singh Gauchhwal puts forward a note of caution against the “disinterested activity” (*niṣkāma-karma*) which seems to have gained primacy in the Hindu tradition.

It seems to have been well recognized that the discipline of disinterested activity is too negative in nature to prompt voluntary activity. And this alone seems to be the reason why it is accorded a primary place in the scheme of those disciplines where the goal is sought mainly through spiritual insight (*jnāna*) or devotion to God (*bhakti*), as for instance, in the *Upanisads*, the *Gita* and the various schools of the Vedānta. But where the ideal is sought through action (*karma*), the characteristically ethical virtue comes to be looked upon

as the flower and fruit of consciously willed activity. This accounts for the attempt made by Hindu thinkers to supplement, if not to replace, the negative virtue of disinterestedness by a positive, concrete ethical discipline of active self-determination – what has been called ‘*dharma*,’ the ethical implications of which need to be adequately followed and properly assessed (Gauchhwal 340).

Ekaśaraṇa Dharma focused on what Gauchhwal terms as the ethical virtue of “willed activity” in the form of *bhakti* (devotion) to a single god, i.e., Kṛṣṇa, in the form of *śravaṇa* (congregational listening) and *kīrtana* (singing the name and deeds of the Almighty). In his *Gunamālā*, Sankardev regards Kṛṣṇa as “Devotees’ wealth and power/Thou art their wish-fulfiller/Thou Bidhi the creator/Poor men’s merciful treasure” (*Gunamālā* 1:4). This form of worship to the Almighty, without elaborate rituals and rites, was hitherto unknown in the Assamese society and therefore, naturally attracted not only the Hindus but also the non-Hindu folks. The initiation process to the religion, known as *xoron lowa* (lit. take shelter), was conducted by the *sattradhikars*, heads of monastic institutions called *sattras*. The influence of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* was significantly felt in the transformation of Assamese society, as both the *sattras* (monasteries) and the *namghars* (prayer houses) played a crucial role in propagating and shaping this spiritual doctrine.

The ethical foundation of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* stemmed from the belief in the divine potential of all souls. There was no strict mandate on religious conformities, and practitioners were urged to follow their own spiritual paths based on their capacity and mental tendency. *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* was against religious and caste-based differences and therefore, followers of all religious and philosophical systems who embraced the path of *Ekaśaraṇa* were encouraged to keep their inherent beliefs intact. By doing so, Sankardev paved the way for inclusivity within the religious belief system, making it accessible to the common people through a medium that was their mother tongue. The Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and other ancient *Sastras* were all written in Sanskrit which was not known to the majority of the inhabitants (Acharyya 478). Other than the objection to the caste-based system, *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* was also against the confinement of religious studies to

the Brahmins. The new faith, also known as the *Mahāpūruṣia* (*maha* – great, *purush* – being) *Dharma*, visualized an ethical society where the flow of knowledge was not hindered for anyone. Sankardev changed the entire religious scenario of his time by emphasizing morality and spiritual discipline and completely rejecting idolatry and ritualistic worship, which he believed was the precursor of all divisions created by human beings. *Vaikuṅṭha* or paradise could be achieved, not by engaging in ritualistic worships, but by one's love for human beings. The influence of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* permeated not only the deep recesses of the state of Assam, but to the political, social, cultural, and religious life of the entire country.

2.1 *Ekaśaraṇa* and the Philosophy of *Bhakti*

Sankardev's *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* was based on the principle of *bhakti* (devotion) to one God. His philosophy of *bhakti* emphasized ethics in spiritual endeavours by promoting direct relationship between the devotee and the deity. This idea of devotion made the limitations in worship for the low-caste people of the society redundant. It also rejected Vedic *karma* and ritualistic worship as a means of devotion. *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* was also known as *Mahāpūruṣia Dharma* because of it being associated with devotion towards the supreme spiritual personality, i.e. Kṛṣṇa. The philosophy of *Ekaśaraṇa* is based on the *dāśya* form of worship, where the devotee expresses love and devotion to God through servitude. Sankardev in his *Gunamālā* sings praises of such devotion to the Lord – “The whole world resteth in Thee/Thou art Son of Daivakee/Thy Feet are the only key/For enslaved men to be free” (*Gunamālā* 1:21). This philosophy of *bhakti* enabled opposing against the unethical practices of caste system as well as against animal sacrifices which was common in several sects of Hinduism. The single-minded devotion propagated by *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* challenged Brahminical Hinduism and accommodated people of all religions, castes, and ethnicity.

Ekaśaraṇa Dharma did not consider the Almighty God as one who was fearsome and had to be propitiated with rituals and sacrifices. Instead, God was believed to be a loving and lovable entity who naturally attracted devotees. Also, the Almighty was

one who inspired ethical living by being *karuṇāmaya* (compassionate), *dinabandhu* (friend of the lowly), *bhakta-vatsala* (beloved of devotees), and *patit-pāṇana* (redeemer of sinners). The *Gunamālā* presents God in this manner – “O Lord, Thou art always full/Thou art supremely joyful/Redeemest many a soul/From the darkest earthly pool (*Gunamālā* 1:32). It is also important to note that even though *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* asserted the worship of the God Kṛṣṇa or Narayana, it did not deny the existence of other gods in the Hindu pantheon or of any other religious belief. It has been rightly observed that “Sankaradeva was firmly convinced that all religions are true, every doctrinal system represents a true path towards divinity. He had studied the tenets of the different religions and observed that all lead to the same” (Acharyya 480). The ethical foundation of the devotional aspect of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* consisted of the *Cari Vastu* or the Fourfold Principles:

- i) *Naam* – chanting and singing the name and qualities of the Supreme God
- ii) *Deva* – worship of a single God (Kṛṣṇa)
- iii) *Guru* – the spiritual teacher who taught one the philosophy of bhakti
- iv) *Bhakat/Bhakta* – devotee

These principles of *bhakti*, central to the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*, were explained to the devotees during *xoron-lowa*, the initiation ceremony. The devotees were primarily directed towards a virtuous way of living and guided to follow ethical social and religious practices.

2.2 Ethical Functioning of *Sattras* and *Namghars*

Sattras are institutional centres associated with the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* which are operated by individual *adhikaras* or *sattradhikars*. Sankardev established his first *sattra* at his birthplace, Bordowa, and later at different places in Assam. Several *sattras* were established at the initiative of the Ahom kings to propagate neo-Vaishnavism. One characteristic feature of the *sattra* is the existence of a *namghar* within its compound. The *sattra* culture started in the 16th century and grew rapidly in the 17th century and played a very important role in the spread of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*. The *namghars* are used as prayer houses for

congregational worship. They are the central structure in the *sattras* and the other buildings are built around them. The non-ritualistic devotional aspect of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* based on singing and chanting the name of God takes place in the *namghars*. More than one *namghar* exists in some villages which are also used for educational, political, cultural, and developmental activities. The discussions that take place in the *namghars* are democratic in nature and uphold the ethical basis of the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*. During the time of Sankardev, the *namghars* also functioned as ‘village parliament’ or ‘village court’ where “collective decisions regarding various issues of community life ranging from construction of water tanks to educational institutions” were taken and “minor cases of moral and civil nature” were tried (Bhuyan 10).

A prominent feature of the *sattra* was its management style, where decentralization was practised at every step. This unique form of leadership was a new feature introduced by Srimanta Sankardev. Decentralized management encouraged the system of feedback from all devotees which formed the basis of all decision-making and inspired a democratic way of life. The *sattra* system also encouraged devotees to become self-dependent. It has been rightly pointed out that

(t)he Satras can be the biggest source of inspiration for the youth of the present generation. The biggest thing that the new generation can learn from the great reformer is the thrust towards development of a ‘work culture’ in the Satras. It was the place where all kinds of industries and crafts flourished five hundred years ago (Hassan 2009).

Those who resided in the *sattras* had to live a life of simplicity. Their day-to-day necessities were fulfilled by things that they grew, constructed, and manufactured.

Sattras were founded on the ethical principles of a casteless and classless society. The *bhakats* (monks) who lived in the *sattras* under the leadership of a *sattradhikar* or *mahanta* were from different strata of the society. Even the *sattradhikars* were not necessarily of high birth. Abhijit Bhuyan has the following observations:

The earliest attempts to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaishnavism was made by Srimanta Sankardeva himself who accepted Govinda belonging to the Gāro tribe; Paramānanda, belonging to the Miri (Mishing) tribe; Narahari, an Āhom man; Narottama belonging to the Nāgā community; Jayarāma, a Bhutiyā person and Cāndsāi, a Muslim person as his disciples. They all took part in the *bhāonā* performances (religious plays) and when required acted as guides to analyze the essence of *Eka Śaraṇa Nām Dharma*. In his popular work, *Kīrtana-ghosā*, Srimanta Sankardeva announces:

Nāhi bhakatita jāti-ajāti vicāra

(There is no sense of caste difference in Bhakti)

Thus, people from all castes and walks of life were received by Srimanta Sankardeva as disciples; and they could even act as teachers in his Vaishnava Order. A democratic outlook permeates the entire teachings and practices of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith in Assam (3).

In fact, it has been recorded that many *sattradhikars* too belonged to indigenous or lower caste groups. Examples may be given of Narayandasa Ata, a disciple of Sankardev who was from the *Tanti* (weaver) community, or of Mathuradasa Ata who despite being from the *Caṇḍāla* (someone who deals with disposal of corpses) community was the first *sattradhikar* of the Barpeta *sattra*. This was contrary to the practice of *varṇā* system by virtue of which the fifth category i.e., the untouchables, whose “untouchability derived from their being considered polluting either because of their occupation as scavengers, such as the Candalas and Doms and those who maintained the cremation grounds, or because they belonged to primitive tribes” (Thapar 122) could not be thought of in such positions of respect. Like the pan-India Bhakti movement and its associated institutions, “(t)he Satras of Sankardeva have done much in determining the march of national progress along the direction of *ahimsa* and democracy and to the end that the village shall be the foundation of the new social order of culture and thought” (Acharyya 481).

Srimanta Sankardev did not merely preach but practised inclusivity in real life. He was a supporter of women’s rights and included women in religious activities at the *sattras* and *namghars*.

Dr. Sanjib Kumar Barkakoti exemplifies his claim that Sankardev was a pioneer of feminism:

The instance of making a woman named Radhika alias Yogamaya the leader of the volunteer force at Tembuwani for construction of dam was an important example of that. It was because of that tradition of giving high status and importance to women, initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva that emergence of women organizers like Kanaklata or litterateur like Padmapriya became possible in the history of *Eka Sharana Nāma Dharma* (57).

Sankardev was also always for the indigenous groups of people and included them in all his activities. A man of the *Mising* tribe called Paramānanda, whose actual name was Pangkong, accompanied him wherever he went. Sankardev went against the limitations of the society and believed that “Krishna bann’d the rites as bad/Made indeed the Brahmins sad/Bless’d the good wives that they had/And made them so very glad” (*Gunamālā* 2: 90). He permitted each and every devotee to read the sacred books and chant the names of God. As a result of his inclusive philosophy, the *sattras* and the *namghars* became the ideal places to challenge and contest the prevalent societal discriminations.

3. Ethical Foundation of Srimanta Sankardev’s Artistic Creations

Srimanta Sankardev’s religious philosophy of *Ekaśaraṇa* was made popular among the common people through his artistic creations. These artistic forms helped disseminate messages of leading life in an ethical way to the common folks. Intended to be performed in front of common illiterate villagers in medieval Assam, *Ankiyâ Naat* included explanations by the *suṭradhāra* at every succeeding stage. The subject matter of Sankardev’s theatrical performances was educative in nature as “(i)n all his creations, including *Ankiyâ Naat*, there is always the local and the regional core that is mostly represented in the vernacular though from this, one can have easy access to the national, and from the national to the international” (Barua 3). Sankardev’s plays were a departure from the classical plays of Bharata and included scenes from day-to-day life which were strictly forbidden otherwise. The paraphernalia used in the theatrical productions were symbolic in

nature. For instance, the rising of the curtain at the beginning of the play symbolized the removal of *māyā* (illusion), so that the devotee could be in direct contact with God.

During Sankardev’s time, education was a privilege which was available only to the upper echelon of the society. The artistic creations of Sankardev enabled people at large to follow an ethical life and come out of the dark abyss of ignorance and blind superstitions. Therefore, when his plays were enacted, when his songs were sung, when his hymns were chanted, the common people received the very knowledge which one obtained in the prevalent formal system of education. Sankardev’s artistic creations also paved the path for value education. Additionally, his teachings helped people acquire knowledge of varied subjects, such as the scriptures, behavioural science, social science, etc. Ethics constituted the very basis of his teachings. He cautioned people to steer away from aggressive behaviour, pride, and other evils. His artistic creations acted as adult education and literacy programmes. The *Bhāonā* performances or the *Borgeets* took place in the *namghar* premises which were ideal places built “without walls or if at all, only with half walls with two rows of pillars with a thatched or tin roof. This has a great deal of symbolic value in terms of promotion of the ideal of equality” (Bhuyan 9). People of all age groups, women, and members of all castes, classes, and religions thronged these programmes, thus, fulfilling Sankardev’s life-long mission of creating an equal and inclusive society.

The artistic creations of Sankardev also helped in imparting knowledge about vocational education. He encouraged the devotees to become self-sufficient and trained them in various crafts. In this context, Dr. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti has made a note of the sustainable and eco-friendly practices in the *sattras*:

The concept of sustainable development was ingrained in the very character of the Thāns and Sattras. There was stress on those activities which were eco-friendly and which could be pursued without impairing the productive capacity for the future generations. For instance, *hengul-hâtâl*, the dyes used by the residents of Thāns and Sattras in diverse activities like preparing *sânci* leaves for writing, in making masks and costumes, and in readying the actors in the Ankiyâ plays were all procured locally.

There was stress on using organic substances like indigo, myrobalan etc. Assam enjoyed comparative advantage in the production of natural dyes, which were also exported (105).

Sankardev also personally supervised the manufacturing of musical instruments, such as the *dimâ* (frame) of the drum Khol (Barkakoti 117), as well as designing of masks and costumes (Borkakoti 105) that his disciples used in the theatrical performances, songs, and dances. This enabled the people to become productive and increase their income. While other religious institutions were engaged only in imparting religious education, the *sattras* had become educational institutions, imparting vocational and value-based knowledge, paving the path for an ethical and inclusive society.

4. Contemporary Relevance of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*

Srimanta Sankardev, in the role of a teacher and religious saint, has greatly impacted the socio-cultural diaspora of the 16th century Assamese society. The aim of this paper is not to contemplate the resurgence of *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma* but to examine the essence of the ethical religion of *Sarba Dharma Sanātana* (all religion is *Sanātana* religion) which is aligned with the experiences and propositions of several other spiritual *gurus* over the centuries in the form of Buddha, Shankaracharya, Vivekananda, and others.

Srimanta Sankardev's proposed philosophy of *Ekaśaraṇa Hari Nāma* with its derivations from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* consists of the three distinct *tattvas* (entities), namely: (a) *Prakṛti* (primal matter), (b) *Puruṣa* (pure personality), and (c) *Parama Puruṣa* (supreme pure personality). Herein, Lord Kṛṣṇa has the immanent capacity as the *Parama Puruṣa* (supreme pure personality). Kṛṣṇa is *caitanya puṛṇa* (supremely conscious) and represents *satya* (supreme truth). *Jīva* (living beings) are in essence *Puruṣa* (pure personalities). Srimanta Sankardev's philosophy on the essential nature of *tattva* cautions against *ajñāna* (ignorance) and *māyā* (illusion) which distracts the *Puruṣa* (pure personality) wherein one becomes heedless of one's own spiritual nature and proceeds towards *Prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* becomes part of *Prakṛti* and considers oneself a material entity which is *jaḍa* (extremely matter like). This results in *Puruṣa's* non devotion to the *Parama Puruṣa* or

the divine almighty. The worship of *Prakṛti* under this false apprehension results in one’s entrapment in *samsāra* (the cycle of births and deaths). Srimanta Sankardev urged the *jīva* to follow the path of *bhakti* (pure devotion) and take refuge in *Parama Puruṣa* represented by Kṛṣṇa. The *jīvas* who are inherently *caitanya* are spiritually and ontologically superior beings to *Prakṛti* and it is their duty to attain *Parama Caitanya* through their *bhakti* to Kṛṣṇa, the *Parama Puruṣa*. *Caitanya* is inherent to *Puruṣa* and leads to the making of a transcendental society where all members are equal. All are *Puruṣa* or pure personalities in the transcendental society of *Vaikuṅṭha* and are governed by the idea of equality.

Srimanta Sankaradeva’s *jīvā* shrouded in *ṁāyā* and *āḥāṁkāṛā* is akin to mankind in today’s information society who is ensnared in materialistic and consumerist strappings. The human race is entrapped in a rat race of shallow material ambition and superficial success. They are stuck in the vicious monotonous cycle of life which is characterized by increasingly narcissistic tendencies as evident by their social media practices of Instagram and ‘selfie’ culture which seeks constant validation of their selves through consumerist and hedonistic activities displaying their wealth and pride. These narcissistic tendencies of the cyber age also give rise to and lead to social evils like cyber bullying wherein people prove their self-worth through *schadenfreude*. This is best showcased in the currently trending Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which has been turned into the popular Netflix series of the same name, where the protagonist Hannah Baker who commits suicide in the beginning of the series is later depicted being on the receiving end of bullying both online and offline. Such societal evils can be dealt with the ethical perspectives inherent in the philosophy of *tattva* which calls to free oneself from the shackles of mindless pursuit of *artha* (worldly gain) and *kāma* (desire) for external posturing and thereby ostensible confirmation of leading a fulfilling life. Contentment lies within, intrinsic to achieving supreme consciousness in the nature of *Caitanya Purna*. Sankardev’s most illustrious work *Kīrtan Ghoxa*, often referred to as *Kīrtan*, is a collection of devotional songs created particularly for group prayers. Sankardev in *Kīrtan Ghoxa* states:

Jāni pitṛ ēraā asura kāma.

*Āpuna mana karaā upasama.
 Śatrau mitra saraē karaiyō sama.
 Ēhisē kṛṣṇara bhakti uttama (393).*

Self-control, Sankardev says, should be cultivated both in body and mind. Supreme devotion to God requires a frame of mind that harbours no ill sentiments for a friend as well as an adversary. Such ethical ways of life as directed by Sankardev can definitely help solve the problems of the contemporary world.

The all-inclusive nature of Srimanta Sankardev's *Ekaśaraṇa Hari Nāma* propagated fraternal bonds of friendship among the various ethnic tribes whose origins can be traced to the Siamese and the Shans of South China known as the Ahoms; the Tibeto-Burmans known as the Koches; and the Jaintias of the Mon-Khmer family constituting the firm pillars of foundation for an extensive Assamese society. His conception of the Assamese society is based on the philosophy of the transcendental and equitable society of *Vaikunṭha*, abolishing the existing class and caste discrimination. Sankardev's Kṛṣṇa shuns the *kahini* (story) of being an epic hero as an ancient Indian historical personality. Rather, his Kṛṣṇa is *Paramāṭma*, the supreme immanent personality existing within the human body as a microcosm. Therefore, in his *Gunamālā*, Sankardev guides his devotees to immerse themselves in the devotion of this supreme being –

To save mankind there is no seer
 Beside Lakshmi's consort dear;
 Know this to be the truth bare,
 Devote yourselves to Faith here.

There's none to save, God apart,
 On this earth in any part;
 Meditate His form in heart,
 Say Hari each day from start.

Madhava's glorious name
 Is the religion supreme;
 Forsake other rule and fame,
 Sing ye the Great Krishna's hymn: (*Gunamālā* 2:93-95).

These teachings opposed the *dharmic* (religious) conception of society which is organized on the basis of hierarchy of *varṇā* and *āśrama* which calls for separate *dharmas* (duties) for the different castes and categories. Derived from the philosophies of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, tribes sanctified by the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa find place in Srimanta Sankardev’s teachings as opposed to the Brahminical orthodoxy which denies the path towards salvation to the śūdras, the outcastes, and the indigenous people alike. The present-day Indian society, although basks in the ideals of unique egalitarianism in terms of ‘Unity in Diversity’ and ‘*Atithi Devo Bhāva*’ meaning ‘Guest is God’, has failed to overcome the dissension of caste and reservation-based politics, education, and employment. Polarized State Elections in Karnataka 2023 stands testimony to discord on religious grounds which in turn can be interpreted as unethical (Barua 2023). In this context, it has been observed that “The Bajarangbali issue played out in such a manner that the Muslim voters got polarized to favor Congress. Even when the BJP criticized the Congress’ promise to ban the Bajrang Dal, in an attempt to bring Hindu voters into its fold and gain an edge over its 2018 vote share, it didn’t yield results” (Bhatt 2023). Another instance of politicalized feud is that of the recent violent ethnic clashes in Manipur which stands witness to the dissension that can be addressed by the ethical all-embracing society envisaged by Sankardev’s *Vaikuṅṭha* which believes in social egalitarianism. Noted journalist and editor of *The Shillong Times*, Patricia Mukhim states:

The problem with India’s Northeast is that boundaries between people and homelands have been drawn by colonialists like Henry McMahon and Cyril Radcliffe who were completely ignorant and insensitive to the kinship ties on either side of the border. There are Kukis of the ‘Zo’ ethnic group in Myanmar as well as the Indian side – they seem to be undeterred by national or international boundaries. Boundaries drawn by a colonial power are therefore problematic and every now and again thorny problems crop up (Mukhim 2023).

Ekaśaraṇa Dharma preaches that non-violence is one of the important hallmarks of a progressive society. The concept of

ahimsā (non-violence) is so remarkable that it has the power to defeat an enemy without any loss. Sankardev being vehemently against the practice of religious sacrifices mentions in *Kīrtan Ghoxa*:

Yaita thākē mōra bhakta udāra caraitra.

Kīṭa-pataṅgakō tathā karaya pabitra.

Nakaraē praāṅṅika hinsā nāhi ēkō sprṅhā.

Āmāta arpaṅa karaē āpunāra dēhā (461).

Referring to the great Hari devotee Prahlad, he says that the magnanimous character of his greatest *bhaktas* can render dignity to even insignificant insects and worms. Such *bhaktas* never harbour harmful and envious feelings towards any living being and live their mortal life in dedication to the Almighty. *Ekaśaraṅa Dharma* challenged Pre-Sankari era orthodox Brahminist religious practices, and the Puranas written in classical languages beyond the comprehension of the common people. It provided an alternative *bhakti*-based *dharma* that could be easily understood and was inclusive of all sections in the society. Srimanta Sankardev based his religion upon the means of equality maintained for the marginalized in the society – the illiterate, the poor, and the voiceless. His discourses consisted of the tales of the downtrodden in the society – the Kirat, Kachari, and *Caṅḍala* – rather than the privileged in the societal strata, such as the Brahmins, the Kayasthas and other upper classes. The 21st century, fuelled by information technology, stands witness to vociferous objections to interpretation of complex sacred texts of different religions. Various cases in public life nowadays showcase the lack of tolerance towards interpretations of sacred religious texts which pays heed to the idea that ethics and religion do not always go together.

The cosmopolitan nature of Srimanta Sankardev's religious teachings garnered followers from both Hinduism and Islam where in a particular day in each year in the *Camariyā Sattra*, there is a partaking of the holy offering known as *prasāda* from the same basin by the devotees irrespective of their religion. Sankardev's *Ekaśaraṅa* religion, on its inception, faced the persecution of Śaktism, as "throughout its history in Assam, *Śaktism* seems to have allied with the Rajas and aristocracy, and often to have combined with them in persecuting the more democratic forms of

Vaishnavism” (Eliot 1161). But the ethos of inclusiveness predominant in the *Ekaśaraṇa* religion could conquer these prejudices in the acquirement of *abhyudaya* (prosperity) and *nisryas* (the supreme spiritual good). The *Ekaśaraṇa* religion also eschews the ritualism and ceremonies of Brahminism and Śaktism. It considered ritualism which infused notions of purity surrounding the concept of ‘touch’ in the caste-based hierarchy as unethical. *Śaktism*, which called for the worship of cult Goddesses with human sacrifices and immoral rites, also found an alternative in *Ekaśaraṇa* religion based on ethical values of non-violence, overcoming anger, forgiveness, and worship of nature.

Sankaradev has catalogued indigenous trees and plants by paying homage to nature, creating an ambience to arouse devotional feeling towards Sri Kṛṣṇa. Sankardev’s *Ekaśaraṇa* philosophy espousing the philosophical and scientific truths of pure *bhakti* contained in the primary text of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* denounced idolatry and the worship of incarnations considered to be the hallmarks of ritualism in Brahminism and *Śaktism* that can lead to the decay of society by encouraging practices which are unethical and illogical. The 2019 human sacrifice case of the Kamakhya temple was recently cracked by the police on 4th April 2023, but heinous crimes of this nature show no signs of wane and we come across several such incidents such as the 2022 Elanthoor Kerala human sacrifice case where two women were tortured and murdered as part of human sacrifice rituals. Celebrated author Indira Goswami opposed the religious exploitation of the common masses and entreats her readers to object against the barbaric practices of animal and human sacrifices at the highly revered Kamakhya Temple in Assam. She presents this practice ironically in this manner –

Come forward. The scriptures say that all you need are two drops of blood on a lotus petal. Just two drops on your own body. Come, come. Anyone who offers a bit of flesh, the size of a sesame seed, from his chest will have all his desires fulfilled within six months. A tiny scrap of flesh from the chest (Goswami 74).

Today’s technology savvy society and the technocratic elites can find solace and solution to numerous real-world existential and philosophical concerns from Srimanta Sankardev’s

Ekaśaraṇa Hari Nāma. Its relevance to judge the right from the wrong in the present-day digital era of revolutionary socio-cultural changes where societies have migrated to virtual spaces and are inhabited by netizens need the harmony and balance between the forces of technology and moral values.

5. Conclusion

It serves as a wake-up call for contemporary technologically-driven society to incorporate the ethical dimensions inherent in the Ekaśaraṇa philosophy envisioned by its founder, Srimanta Sankardev. Despite the fragmentation of the core philosophy into various samhatis by followers of Sankardev and Madhabdev, leading to a resurgence of Brahmanism and Śaktism within the Ekaśaraṇa philosophy, the focus of this endeavor does not delve into the ideological conflicts arising from these subsequent and sometimes contradictory ideas. The Ekaśaraṇa philosophy, rooted in Srimanta Sankardev's teachings, is fundamentally based on an ethical framework promoting inclusiveness, equity, and magnanimity towards individuals of all castes, classes, ethnicities, and religions. Functioning as a neo-Vaishnavite movement, the Ekaśaraṇa Nāma Dharma, guided by Sankardev, offers an alternative to religious practices entrenched in orthodoxy, superstitions, the caste system, untouchability, and the suppression of women. Sankardev encourages his followers to recognize the divine presence in all beings, irrespective of their form, advocating for a belief in equality and wholehearted respect for every entity including dogs, donkeys, or outcasts. Consequently, the ethical foundation of Ekaśaraṇa serves as a source of solace and provides normative and applied ethical principles to counteract the discord and animosity prevalent in a society marked by divisions. This societal discord often stems from metaethics, manifesting in divergent interpretations of traditional religious texts and biased religious practices. Sankardev asserts that God is omniscient and omnipotent, emphasizing that devotion to God is the sole path to liberation. This mystery is unveiled in *Shri Krishna's Vaikuntha Pranayama*:

Kṛṣṇa kathā śunā sarbajanē

Udhāraiba kṛṣṇara kīrtanē

Mōkṣa pā'ibā gr̥habasē thāki

Jāni hari hari bōlā dāki” (Das 4718-19).

The edicts of the *Ekaśaraṇa* philosophy can therefore be looked upon as a new spiritual integration that challenges dominant discriminatory ideas in the society, be it social, political or economic as was done in the *sattras* of the earlier days.

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