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NEO-VAISHNAVISM AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM: THE PEDAGOGICAL VISION OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA

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ABSTRACT

Education plays a transformative role in shaping human civilization by nurturing moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth. In fifteenth-century Assam, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva emerged as a visionary reformer who not only revitalized religious life through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement but also laid the foundation for a distinctive educational philosophy. His ideas integrated spirituality, social equality, moral discipline, artistic expression, and experiential learning. This paper explores the philosophical foundations of Sankardeva's educational thought and critically examines its relevance in the contemporary globalised world. The study adopts an analytical and descriptive methodology based on primary texts and secondary scholarly sources. The findings reveal that Sankardeva's educational ideals—centered on character formation, inclusive learning, cultural integration, and value-based education—remain highly significant in modern educational discourse.

KEYWORDS: Educational Philosophy, Neo-Vaishnavism, Value Education, Namghar, Satra, Globalisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a dynamic force that guides society toward ethical refinement and intellectual advancement. Throughout history, great reformers have redefined educational ideals in response to social crises. Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), born in Bardowa, Assam, appeared during a time of social fragmentation, ritualistic rigidity, and moral decline. Through the establishment of *Ek-Sharan-Nama-Dharma* (Neo-Vaishnavism), he initiated a comprehensive movement that transformed religious, cultural, and social life in Assam.

While Sankardeva is widely acknowledged as a saint, poet, dramatist, and social reformer, his educational philosophy has not received adequate scholarly attention. His works and institutions such as *Namghar* and *Satra* reveal a systematic educational framework emphasizing moral purification, experiential learning, democratic participation, and spiritual realization.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze the philosophical foundations of Sankardeva's educational thought.
2. To examine his views on aims of education, curriculum, teaching methods, discipline, and the role of teacher and learner.
3. To evaluate the relevance of his educational philosophy in the contemporary globalised context.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative research methods, primarily analytical and descriptive in nature. Data have been collected from primary sources such as *Kirtan Ghosha*, *Bhagavata* translations, and other literary works of Sankardeva. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and historical analyses related to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Human civilization progresses through education. It is education that elevates human beings from primitive instincts to refined moral, cultural, and spiritual consciousness, guided by the ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness. However, history reveals that societies often deviate from these universal values due to ignorance, superstition, social inequality, and moral decay. At such critical junctures, extraordinary personalities emerge to guide humanity back to the righteous path. These reformers appear in different forms depending on time, place, and social need. In fifteenth-century Assam, such a transformative figure was Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva.

Born in 1449 at Bardowa Alipukhuri in present-day Nagaon district of Assam, Sankardeva emerged as a beacon of enlightenment during a period marked by social disorder, religious degeneration, and political instability. Society at that time was deeply affected by blind rituals, superstitions, caste discrimination, and unethical religious practices, including the

excesses of Tantric and Bamachari traditions. The masses lived in fear and ignorance, deprived of spiritual clarity and moral guidance. Sankardeva's arrival marked the end of this darkness and the dawn of a new era filled with hope, harmony, and enlightenment. From an early age, Sankardeva displayed extraordinary intellectual brilliance and creative talent. His exceptional genius became evident when he composed a stuti (hymn) immediately after learning the Assamese consonants. His mastery over the four Vedas, fourteen Shastras, and eighteen Puranas within a short span reflects not only his prodigious memory but also his deep spiritual insight. Yet, Sankardeva was not merely a scholar or theologian; he was a visionary reformer whose religious mission was inseparable from social reconstruction and educational reform.

4.1 Vaishnavism and Social Transformation

The religion propagated by Sankardeva, popularly known as Ek-Sharan Nama Dharma, was based on exclusive devotion to Lord Vishnu (Krishna) as the supreme deity. This form of Vaishnavism rejected idol worship, ritualism, caste hierarchy, and priestly domination. Instead, it emphasized devotion through Nama (chanting of God's name), moral purity, equality, and love for all beings. Sankardeva's spiritual movement had a profound impact on Assamese society, transforming its ethical, cultural, and intellectual foundations.

Just as the Renaissance transformed Europe through literature and humanistic thought, Sankardeva's literary and cultural movement initiated a renaissance in Assam. His contributions awakened the Assamese people to a sense of identity, national consciousness, social responsibility, and spiritual awareness. His literary creations such as Kirtan-Ghosa, Bhagavata translations, and poetic works like Rukmini Haran, Gopal, Parijat Haran, and Ram Vijay brought sacred knowledge to the common people in their own language. His devotional songs, including Borgeet and Bhatima, enriched Assamese music and deepened emotional and spiritual expression.

4.2 Contributions to Literature, Drama, and Culture

Sankardeva was a pioneer in Assamese drama and prose. His creation of Cihna Yatra, a one-act operatic drama, is considered one of the earliest examples of drama not only in Assam but also in the broader history of world theatre. Through Ankia Naat and Bhaona, he introduced innovative techniques of storytelling, music, dance, and visual representation to communicate philosophical and moral truths in an engaging and experiential manner. He also introduced

Assamese prose through the dialogues of the Sutradhar in Ankia Bhaona, marking a significant milestone in the development of the Assamese language. His artistic genius extended to dance (Sattriya), music, painting (Vrindavani Vastra), and stagecraft, making his cultural movement holistic and multidimensional.

Sankardeva's movement was not a solitary effort. His chief disciple, Mahapurusha Madhavadeva, along with other devoted followers, played a vital role in expanding and institutionalizing the Vaishnava movement across Assam. Together, they reshaped Assamese society by establishing a value system based on devotion, equality, discipline, and compassion.

4.3 Namghar and Sattriya: Centers of Education and Social Equality

The establishment of Namghar (community prayer halls) and Sattriya (monastic institutions) stands as one of Sankardeva's most enduring contributions. These institutions functioned not only as religious centers but also as hubs of education, cultural preservation, social interaction, and democratic participation. People from all castes and communities were welcome, making them symbols of social equality and collective learning.

The socialist spirit inherent in Sankardeva's philosophy is evident in these institutions. Rarely in world history has a single individual contributed so comprehensively to religion, language, literature, education, culture, dance, drama, and social reform. His contributions transcend religious boundaries and continue to influence Assamese society to this day. Sankardeva passed away in 1558 at the remarkable age of 120, entrusting the responsibility of the Vaishnava community to Madhavadeva.

4.4 Sankardeva's Philosophy of Life

Sankardeva's philosophy of life was deeply spiritual yet grounded in realism. He believed in the impermanence of the physical body and the immortality of the soul. While destruction is inevitable in the material world, the soul that takes refuge in God attains eternal peace. His rejection of artificiality aligns him partially with naturalistic philosophy. He opposed external show, ritual excess, and idol worship, advocating instead for inner devotion and sincere spiritual experience through Harinam. However, Sankardeva was not influenced by hedonistic or Charvaka philosophy, which prioritizes material pleasure. His worldview

represents a harmonious synthesis of spiritual idealism, ethical realism, and humanistic values.

4.5 Educational Philosophy of Sankardeva

Education, according to Sankardeva, is the process of removing ignorance (Maya) and realizing the Supreme Truth. The ultimate aim of education is self-purification, self-control, and self-realization, leading the individual toward refuge at the feet of the omnipotent God. Education transforms behavior qualitatively and continues its influence beyond physical existence, shaping the soul's journey. The primary aim of education is spiritual enlightenment. Alongside this, Sankardeva emphasized moral development, rational thinking, cultural refinement, and the revival of human dignity.

Sankardeva advocated a curriculum that promoted:

- Revival of holistic human personality
- Development of rationality and critical thinking
- Cultural transformation and preservation
- Moral and ethical education

This approach challenged the rigid and exclusive educational systems dominated by priestly classes. Sankardeva's teaching methods were both democratic and psychological. He rejected authoritarian, teacher-centered instruction and encouraged dialogue, discussion, questioning, and participation. Learning was joyful, experiential, and activity-based, using music, dance, drama, storytelling, and visual arts. Sankardeva exemplified the ideal teacher. His life reflected truthfulness, moral integrity, wisdom, humility, eloquence, and compassion. He maintained a warm and respectful relationship with his disciples, guiding them not as passive listeners but as active seekers. His methods fostered self-realization rather than rote learning, earning him the title Jagat Guru (Teacher of the World). Disciples were expected to practice self-discipline, humility, devotion, and ethical conduct. Discipline was internal rather than imposed, arising naturally from love, faith, and understanding.

4.6 Relevance of Sankardeva's Educational Philosophy Today

Sankardeva's philosophy remains profoundly relevant in the modern world. His teachings address not only spiritual concerns but also mental and physical well-being, social harmony, and environmental sustainability. His famous saying that "ten trees are equal to one son"

reflects his deep ecological awareness. In an era of environmental crisis, his advocacy for conservation and respect for nature holds global significance.

Modern educational thinkers such as Froebel, Montessori, Caldwell Cook, Parkhurst, and Armstrong emphasized child-centered, play-based, and experiential learning centuries later. Remarkably, Sankardeva practiced these principles over five hundred years ago. His use of music, drama, dance, and visual tools like Vrindavani Vastra anticipated modern theories of visual and sensory learning. Such methods effectively engage cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor domains, making learning meaningful and lasting.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Srimanta Sankardeva's philosophy of life and education represents a timeless and universal framework for human development. His integration of spirituality, education, culture, social equality, and environmental consciousness makes him not only a religious reformer but also a visionary educator and humanist. Even in the contemporary global context, his ideas continue to inspire, guide, and transform society, affirming the enduring relevance of his educational philosophy.

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