

# Socio-Cultural Communication of Srimanta Shankardev: An Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*Shankardev was the architect of modern Assam. He was a versatile person who has delivered his considerable proficiency of language, communication, literature, culture, etc. He has put his stamp on Assamese society, literature, culture, religion and the way of life. He had a deep understanding of the Vedas, the Vedanta, The Gita and the Bhagavata-Purana. He dealt with all the branches of culture to fulfil the needs of the people of Assam. Shankardev established the "Satra" and "Namghar" which are not only religious institutions but also a network of development communication. Thus, his works have a lot of philosophical, cultural and literary significances in the context of the development of the Assamese society. This paper is concerned particularly with the inspection of Shankardev's communication facet. It is an undertaking towards understanding how Shankardev originated as a successful development communicator by upholding the ancient Indian communication traditions alongside devising audience-specific inventive communication techniques to recognize the objectives that he had set out to fulfil, especially Namghar and Satra. The activities of Namghars and Satras, which is still an integral part of the Assamese society and culture, reflect the power of attraction of Shankardev's organization and his quality of communication.*

(Key words: *Communication, Communicator, Culture, Development, Shankardev, Society*)

## INTRODUCTION

According to Shankardev's Charit-Puthi<sup>1</sup> he was born in 1449 AD in Bordowa, Nagaon district of Assam. He lost his mother Satyasandha after three days of his birth and he was raised up by his grandmother Khershuti. At the age of seven his father Kusumbar Bhuyan passed away. His grandmother admitted him to the pathshala of Mahendra Kandali<sup>2</sup> at the age of 12. He was a brilliant student from the very beginning. He wrote his first poem after attending the Pathshala for a few days and having the mere knowledge of consonants and no vowels at all:

*"Korotolo komolo komolo dolo noyono  
Bhobo dobo dohono gohono bono xoyono..."*(Sankardeva)

He got married to Shuryavati at the age of 23, but four years later she passed away after giving birth to their first child Manu. He raised her up and after her marriage he went for pilgrimage. It was a twelve-year-long trip when he visited Ayodhya, Gaya, Puri, Benaras, Mathura, Vrindavan, Dwarka, Badrika Ashrama, etc. After returning back to Assam her grandmother arranged his second marriage in order to save the legacy of the Bhuyan<sup>3</sup> family. He had inherited Shiromaniship<sup>4</sup> from his father, but he refused to accept it. Despite being a Shiromani Shankardev lived his life as a saint leaving all the luxuries behind and working for the people.

<sup>1</sup> Charit Puthi is the biography of Sankardeva written in various Satras in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is a document written in the style of prose. It is also known as Katha Guru Charit.

<sup>2</sup> Mahendra Kandali was a great Acharya of ancient Assam. He was the one who changed the name of Sankarato Sankardeva when he realized the extraordinary abilities of the boy in the Pathshala.

<sup>3</sup> Bhuyans were the landlords and warriors of medieval Assam. These people governed the villages.

<sup>4</sup> The leader of the Bhuyans was called Shiromani.

There was some crisis going on in Assam during that period. Shankardev decided to focus on Development of the society. He took the Assamese culture to a whole new level through his songs, dance, drama, and literature. Through his songs, dramas and other compositions he changed the scene in Assamese literature from mediocre to excellent. He travelled throughout Assam and established Namghars and Satras in order to unite the people of the region. Few years later he went on another pilgrimage. When he returned back the King had turned hostile to him so he had to flee to Bheladonga in Coch Behar. He had a good relation with King Naranarayana <sup>5</sup> of Coch Behar where he was assigned a respectable place in the King's court. Shankardev passed away in Bheladanga at the age of One hundred and Twenty.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of the present research is to initiate a detailed study towards understanding Srimanta Shankardev's contribution as a communicator for development.

## Methodology

This is an analytical study on Shankardev's methods of communication which made him an effective Development communicator. The researcher has chosen qualitative research approach only.

For Primary source write-ups and compositions of Shankardev including his books, songs, poems, dramas of Shankardev were studied. The researcher has also done content analysis of some books on Shankardev written by various authors. Secondary data was also collected from journals and web documents for supportive evidences reflecting Shankardev's communication practices and abilities..

## Shankardev's Utilization of Sādhāraṇikaraṇa

During that period all creative works such as literature, songs, etc. was written in Sanskrit, which could only be understood by a small fraction of the population. For this reason Shankardev composed his literary works in Brajawali language which was composed of several languages spoken in the region. Despite being well-versed in Sanskrit, Shankardev wrote only one of his books in Sanskrit and the rest were all written in Brajawali and Assamese so that the common people could read them. Thus, he continued the ancient Indian tradition of sādharmaṇikaraṇa.

Sādhāraṇikaraṇa/saralikaṛana fundamentally refers to the scientific method of trans-generational communication conceptualized by the ancient ṛṣis of India to ensure the continuity of undiluted knowledge flow by 'establishing commonness among the participants of a communication process through the process of simplification' (Bhattacharyya, 2013, p. 72). Thus, Shankardev's preference of Brajawali and Assamese languages over the Sanskrit language proves that he too effectively utilized the ancient Indian tradition of sādharmaṇikaraṇa for effectively communicating with the masses.

## Harmonious Combination of Elements from Different Groups

Shankardev wanted to spread the message of Neo-Vaishnavism through liberalism and humanism in ancient Assam. Hostility was prevailing all over Assam during that period. In order to unite them all Shankardev borrowed the components of all the communities and applied it into his creative works.

Shankardev says:

*“Nabachai bhakati jati ajati  
 Krsnara kirtane jati ajati nabache”*  
 (There is no discrimination in Bhakti  
 There is no discrimination in the Krishna's Kirtana)  
*“Kukkura candela gardavaro atma ram  
 Janiya savako pari kariva pranam”* (Kirtan)  
 (There is God even in a dog and a Chandala  
 So one should pay respect to everybody)

<sup>5</sup> Naranarayana was ruler of undivided Coch kingdom in 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the son of Bishwa Singha.

Shankardev has mentioned several times in “Kirtana” and other works that everyone is equal regardless of caste or class. He even considered a dog or any other living being to be equal to a human being.

Damodardev mentions in his Shankardev Charit that there was no discrimination in Shankardev’s Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma. Everything is considered to be equal and a part of God, and there is no place for doubt:

*"Kisu vinni nai jana ake nam dharma  
Nakara sansay buji lowa nam dharma"*  
-(284, Damodordeva, Sankardeva Charit)  
(There is no discrimination in Nam Dharma  
Accept the Nam Dharma with no doubts)

It was a formula applied by him so that everyone has a mutual respect for each other which would help them connect better. In this way Shankardev created a mutual understanding and connection between all the communities.

### **Establishment of Group Communication Platforms**

Shankardev established the Namghar as a platform for communication among all communities and classes of people. Namghar has played an important role in unifying ancient Assam. “The Satras were developed as the socio-religious centers while the Namghar in every village was founded to serve a variety of purposes of a prayer hall, cultural centre, library and a venue of social get-together.”(Chakravarty, 1998, p. 104)

Shankardev wanted to enhance integrity among the people, so he created a network of Satras and Namghars all over ancient Assam which became a source of information, entrainment and education. Initially people did not turn up to the Namghars, so Shankardev started advertising it. He used to place paintings in public places that conveyed information about upcoming events to be held in Namghars. This attracted more people into the Namghar. Music, Dance and Drama play a very effective role in communicating messages whilst providing entertainment and Shankardev applied it successfully. His songs were composed of folk elements and he also made use of folk instruments only, and thus people accepted it as their own. Shankardev also included folk elements such as the ones from Ojhapali, Dhulia and Putula-nach in his dramas. Namghars and Satras were not just religious institutions, but also a communication hub. People from different villages were able to connect with each other because of these institutions. It became a source of entertainment, information, and knowledge gathering for the masses. People began gaining interest and started visiting Namghars and Satras regularly. In this way people of different tribes and communities began to come closer and started uniting together. Shankardev used to place advertisements of upcoming events in the Satra and the Namghar in public places. He used to paint these by himself.

### **Emphasis on Teamwork**

Shankardev believed in teamwork and the power of group communication and wanted people to solve their problems by discussing with each other. In his “Anadipaton” Shankardev has emphasized on group communication by stating that all tasks can be accomplished easily and successfully if people communicate and discuss it in a group.

*"Nana karma koribak kore aalasn  
Ako korma sthir nohe taak buli mon"*  
-(63 Sankardeva Anadipaton)  
(Discuss with others before doing a task  
A task done alone does not satisfy the heart)

With this in mind Shankardev also assigned the function of a Panchayat system to the Namghars where villagers could gather and discuss their common problems and find their solutions. Satras also served as a center of education and learning. Music, drama, dance, literature among many other subjects were taught here. For example the paintings and other visual art made by the people were used to decorate the Satras and Namghar’s. This kept the institutions attractive to newcomers as well as older visitors.

Shankardev did not just unify Assam, but also connected Assam with the rest of India. At the age of thirty-four he went for a twelve-year-long pilgrimage when he visited several pilgrimage sites all over North India. He learned a great deal about the culture and traditions of all these places which motivated him for his well-

known works. Shankardev translated the Ramayana and Bhagwat Gita among many other books into Assamese. This created a communication bridge between Assam and the rest of India. As observed by D. N. Chakravarty, "Sri Shankardev will ever be remembered in the history of this country as one of the greatest integrators of the Indian people." (Chakravarty, 1998, p. 105)

### KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

He dedicated all his works for development of the society. He eliminated caste system from the society in order to unify the society.

Shankardev believed in teamwork which is an important aspect of development communication. Shankardev had a great leadership quality and he could convince people easily through his communicative powers. This is the reason why Shankardev was able to propagate his ideology into the minds of the people. The society was diverse in the period and Shankardev was aware of this. Shankardev established Namghar and Satra so that these people from diverse communities could communicate and unite with one another. He introduced the Bhakti movement in Assam in order to give a unified system of faith to everyone. He respected the talents of talented people and inspired them to work with him. This is the reason why the system of Shankardev's Satras and Namghar's expanded to great success and created a mutual understanding among the people.

A fundamental skill of a good communicator is the skill to motivate and bring people together. Shankardev had brought together the whole of Assamese society through the institution of Namghar and Satra. Shankardev's simple lifestyle also helped him in freely mixing and interacted easily with everyone. As a communicator Shankardev had used various medium of communication. He used both verbal and non-verbal communication. He used to hold meetings to discuss with people and also used to discuss personally with individuals. His followers also used to carry his messages to different part of the region and communicate with the people. He used to advertise upcoming events of Satras and Namghar's in public places through paintings that he painted himself. He used to write down his ideologies and he has written many books based on his ideology so that it is accessible to the masses.

Shankardev used to emphasize on audio-visual medium. He did not just write dramas but also made the people act so that it serves as a medium for entertainment at the same time people gain knowledge from it. Music is a strong medium of communication so Shankardev used it as a tool for propagating his ideology. Shankardev introduced dance and drama to the society so that people could use it as a medium for entertainment and gain knowledge at the same time.

Language plays an important role in communication. Looking at the number of languages spoken in the region Shankardev came up with the Brajawali language which was a blend of all the languages spoken in the region so that all the people could read and understand it, at the same time share ideas with each other. At the same time Shankardev also emphasized on translation in order to connect Assam with the rest of India. In order to sustain the communication and connectivity with people of other states, Sankardeva used to invite them regularly to Satra and Namghar.

### Conclusion of the Study

Shankardev was the founder of modern Assamese literature and culture. Due to his contributions for the Assamese society he has earned the title of Mahapurush. Srimanta Shankardev was a multi-dimensional personality. He was a religious saint, singer, actor, poet, painter, instrumentalist, writer, and communicator among many others.

The central idea of Shankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism was "Ek dev, ek shew, ek bine nai keu" meaning "God is one". There was no discrimination between the rich and the poor, the upper and the lower castes, etc. in his religion. This created a communication bridge between the people. He went to different parts of Assam and established Namghars and Satras which helped to connect the people together. It is surprising to see such a unification being carried out by a single man more than 550 years ago.

Shankardev was impressed by the simplicity of the Bhakti movement and decided to introduce it in Assam. Animal sacrifice was prevalent and even human sacrifice was practiced occasionally. Shankardev wanted to come up with a unified system of faith which would connect and unify all the communities together and at

the same time eliminate hostility that existed between different communities. With this aim he made a network of communication that connected all the different castes, classes, and communities together.

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