CHAPTER -3

Sankaradeva and his Concept of Bhakti
3.1 Bhakti – In Sankaradeva’s view:

The Assamese people have always revered Srimanta Sankaradeva as a founder of a religious sect. He was not only the founder of ‘Naba Vaishnava Dharma’ (Neo-Vaishnavism) but also the initiator of the great Assamese culture. When someone pronounces the word Dharma (Religion), the first thing that comes to mind is the dedicated veneration of God. It can be also veneration of other gods or goddesses whom one worships. The motive of such veneration is either hope of accumulation of wealth and worldly riches or to attain Moksha (liberation of the soul). Though the idea of Sankaradeva’s dharma was complete surrender of the Spiritual Being before God Almighty, yet, at the same time it was liberal in character. The dharma founded by him not only talked of spirituality, but it also taught man to broaden his thoughts towards betterment of not only the self but also the society and nation at large, so that everlasting beauty, peace and progress becomes a reality. This ever-dynamic factor of the teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva moulded a whole nation (the Assamese Community) and culture. Till today its essence can be felt.

All those saints who have taken birth in this world have sacrificed their lives for the cause of humanity and the greater welfare of mankind. Welfare of mankind was their objective in this mortal world. Saint Sankaradeva took mortal birth in the fifteenth century AD. During the mediaeval times in India when the religious cum social reformer Sankaradeva was born, some complexities as well as ill-practices crept up to the various rites and rituals observed during different modes of idol worship. The class based Indian society of those times had to go through some ordeals in view of such religious autocracy and exploitation of the upper classes upon the so called lower classes in society. The religious autocracies of those times would have been avoided if
the people wielding the ‘All Powerful Staff’ of religion were more human and sympathetic towards the miserable lot in society. They tried to ‘Exploit’ religion for their own interest. In the gradual course of time this situation created social restlessness in society. Sankaradeva wanted to bring some kind of spiritual stability in the minds of people. He took a farsighted long term strategy and that was propagation of Nirguna Bhakti among the masses crossing across barriers of religion, cast and creed.¹

The basis of Bhakti Dharma as projected by Sankaradeva lies in the Bhagavata. Lord Viṣṇu has been propagated as the Supreme Power in the Bhagavata. ‘Many in One and One in Many’ – this was the basic philosophy of the religious ideology of Sankaradeva. The basis of the religion founded by Sankaradeva was ‘Ekatattwa’ (one principle).² He has expressed his view that it is Bhakti which is the supreme path to liberate man from worldly ties or bondage or Maya. Sankaradeva advocated for Nirguna Bhakti. In Nirguna Bhakti a devotee worships the formless form of Brahma or God. Formless God also means that God who is worshipped without an idol.³ Now in case of idol worship, a lot of rites and rituals are associated. A particular class of people “well-versed” in Karma – kanda (the canto of the Vedas in which ceremonies and rituals are stated) perform rituals to appease God in His Sakara Rupa (qualified form) i.e., in the form of idol.

It needs to be mentioned that Sankaradeva identified the ideology of the Bhagavata as the basis of the Bhakti Dharma propagated by him because he realized that it suited the prevailing condition of the society then. The chaotic state of affairs prevalent in the contemporary society of his times made him think that in order to bring stability to society each and every member in society is able to lead a peaceful life, things should be brought into a just and stable state as far as their social, cultural and
professional life is concerned. The state of stability of these basic features of social life as a whole helps both individual and social life to prosper. Keeping this in view, it can be said that the religion founded by Sankaradeva has one significant characteristic. His aim was not only to bring a feeling of bliss and tranquility in the minds of people, but he actually made efforts to bring tranquility to the real society. He left no stone unturned to bring real peace in society. That is why Sankaradeva has promulgated a simpler form of Bhakti Dharma— _Ek Sharan Naam Dharma_ for the convenience of the common people.  

The Bhakti movement is a distinct phenomenon in the history of religion in India during the above mentioned period. The basis of Bhakti Dharma as projected by Sankaradeva lies in the Bhagavad Purana. He was profoundly attracted by the text of *Bhagavad Purana*. Lord Viṣṇu has been propagated as the Supreme power in the Bhagavad Purana. This impressive divine character of the Bhagavad Purana had great influence on Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva is generally known as the founder of the “ _Ek Sharan Naam Dharma_”. He was the one who initiated the steady flow of Bhakti Dharma at such a juncture of time when Vedic rituals and ‘ _Karma Kanda_’ were at its zenith. Sankaradeva had the courage to give a strong stand against such elaborate and extravagant religious rituals and practices which were observed to please God and gain His blessings or favour through His representatives the priests, who mastered the Holy Scriptures (Vedas, Vedantas, etc.). But Sankaradeva followed a simple formula in his noble venture. He was a staunch supporter of Advaitavaad. He collected the essence of each and every religious scripture and remodeled it in such a way that it served the purpose of contemporary society then. ‘Many in One and One in Many’— this was the
basic philosophy of the religious ideology of Sankaradeva. The universal appeal of this idea played a vital role in popularizing the philosophy of ‘Ek Sharana Tattwa’.

A chaotic state of affairs prevailed in society at the time when Sankaradeva founded the *Naba Vaishnav Dharma* or Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Social life, politics and religious life – everywhere a deplorable condition prevailed. Since centuries, Assam has been the home of numerous indigenous people and different groups coming from other parts of India. To the east were the Ahoms, the Koch kings ruled in the western part. Time and again the Mughals attacked Assam. India saw a number of movements in the middle ages. The Bhakti movement was one such movement which created great transformation in social life of India. The *Naba Vaishnav Dharma* and the movement associated with it that took place in North East India (Assam) had its roots in the Bhakti movement. Sankaradeva’s personal involvement in this particular movement brought a drastic change to the contemporary Assamese society then. He was the one to stand tall against the irregularities taking place then in the name of religion. He wanted the people to breathe in fresh air by means of spirituality. His idea of one God (*Ek Dev Ek Sev*) caught the attention of many. From the archeological findings, remains of sculptures and architecture of that period, it can be understood that both Hinduism and Buddhism were prevalent in the Assamese society at that time. The construction of the Kamakhya temple by king Narak, the numerous religious stories described in the Puranas, the copperplates of the 8th – 9th century which had mention of land donations to Brahmins, indicate to the fact that Hinduism was prevalent in society then. At the time when the Bhakti movement found its root in other parts of India and became stronger and stronger with the advance of time, the situation was a complete contrast to it in Assam during that time. A multitude
of groups following diverse religious beliefs and practices created a chaotic state in Assam then. There was no restriction on the practise of irrational beliefs then. It was quite natural for malpractices and immoral deeds to show up in a society void of moral values, spiritual realization and sincere accomplishment of mundane duties. Tantrism was practiced in the Kamakhya temple in Kamrup, the Tamreswari temple in Sadia, etc. These sites were the centers of Tantrik worship in Assam in those days. Before Sankaradeva came into being, people in the Assamese community did not hesitate to follow or practice any belief or ritual which could harm them. This blind faith of the common people towards religion was an advantage for the so called preachers and practitioners of religion. These people took advantage of the innocent God-fearing people and fulfilled their monetary interest and carnal desires. Children and young men were sacrificed to please Gods and Goddesses. The Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra spoke highly about sacrifice of human beings. There was also mention of offering human blood to Gods and Goddesses in these two books. In other words to say, Tantrik cult was quite prevalent during that period. All these Tantrik cult and rituals had such deep impact in the minds of common people that they moved away from the path of Sanatan Dharma. In view of the prevailing situation in society, Sankaradeva gave form to a new religion in society with a view to bring both banks of Brahmaputra valley closer with the introduction of a new culture and spiritual realization. His idea of that spiritual realization was ‘Krishnastu Bhagawan Swayam’ (meaning:- All the Gods are a part of Sri Krishna each).

Sankaradeva has expressed his view that it is Bhakti which is the supreme path to liberate man from worldly ties or bondage or Maya. In the Bhagavat Purana Sri Krishna has said that it is through Bhakti alone that all the sins of a Bhakta is washed
away. It is through the Bhakti of Sri Krishna alone that sinners can be delivered from
their sins. A Bhakta’s foremost duty is to meditate and bring to his mind the image and
activities of the Lord. Sankaradeva wrote in the Kirtan Ghosha –

“Nalage Devo Dwijo Rishi Huibe
Nalage Sambhuto Shastra Janibe
Mishate More Aano Karma Kari
Howonta Bhakatite Tusta Hari”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning:- (You) need not be a god or a brahmin, nor a sage,
you need not master all the holy scriptures,
it is useless to toil for the Lord in other things,
it is simply Bhakti through which one can please Hari.)

So, it can be observed that the religion founded by Sankaradeva is based on
‘Ek Sharon Bhakti ’. According to him it is through Bhakti that man is liberated from
the bonds of Maya. He has also said that it is Bhakti mārga and not Karma mārga (way
of action), Yoga marga (way of yoga) or Jñan marga (way of knowledge) through
which the supreme bliss can be achieved. This has also been quoted in the Bhagavat
Gīta and Narada Sutra.

“Naradasttu tadpirtakhilacharata taddismarane parambyakultati”

(Narada Bhakti Sutra, Verse-19)

(Meaning:- Narada has said that when one surrenders one’s Karma before the Almighty
and goes into a trance uttering the Lord’s name, this state of mind is known
as Bhakti.)
That is why Sankaradeva has promulgated a simpler form of Bhakti Dharma – *Ek Sharan Naam Dharma* for the convenience of the common people. This Bhakti Dharma is known by several other names. For example: *Maha-purushiya Dharma, Bhagawati Dharma, Ek Sharan Dharma*, etc. Sankaradeva explained in his preachings that Lord Viṣṇu is the Supreme Being. He is the ultimate truth of this universe. The people should worship Him whole heartedly. They should surrender themselves before Him completely. This ‘surrender’ is the complete surrender of the soul – the spiritual surrender. This complete surrender before one God alone came to be known as *Ek Sharana Dharma*. Sankaradeva has taken this concept from Srimad Bhagavat. Again, in the Gita the third Pandava Arjuna surrenders before Lord Krishna and seeks his advice. It was then that Lord Krishna associated Bhakti (devotion) with Karma (action), Jñāna (knowledge) and Yoga and gave an explanation of *Ek Sharan* thus –

"Manmanaa bhava madbhakto
Madyaajee maam namaskuru
Maamevaishyasi yuktvaivam
Atmaanam matparayanah"  

(Bhagavad Gita, IX-34)

(Meaning:-You concentrate your Citta (mind) on Me; I should be the objective of your Bhakti. You worship Me and Me alone. I promise that you will get Me because you are My favorite. You discard everything else except Me. I will deliver you from all sins. Don’t despair.)

Following this teaching of Lord Krishna to Arjuna, Sankaradeva founded the *Ek Sharan Naam Dharma* in Assam and this came to be known as the main theme of the *Mahapurushiya dharma*.

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The adorable God associated with the Bhakti movement is Sri Krishna, who is the Saguana and Sakara (qualified) manifestation of the Nirguna and Nirakara (unqualified) Brahma of the Upanishada. The philosophical ideas and cultural vision of Sankaradeva is based on the Brahma tattwa (Brahman) of Vedanta, that which has transformed into Bhakti Rasa through the medium of Sri Krishna. It needs to be mentioned that Sankaradeva chose the ideology of the Bhagavad as the basis of the Bhakti Dharma propagated by him because he realized that it suited the prevailing condition of the society then. The chaotic state of affairs prevalent in the contemporary society of his times made him think that in order to bring stability to society so that each and every member in society is able to lead a peaceful life, things should be brought to a stable state as far as their social, cultural and professional life is concerned. The state of stability of these basic features of social life as a whole helps both individual and social life to prosper. Keeping this in view, it can be said that the religion founded by Sankaradeva has one significant characteristic. His aim was not only to bring a feeling of bliss and tranquility in the minds of people, but he actually made efforts to bring tranquility to the real society. He left no stone unturned to bring real peace in society.

3.2 Advaitavaad in Sankaradeva’s Bhakti Dharma

A prominent feature of Bhakti Dharma founded by Sankaradeva is the unconditional surrender before God – Lord Viṣṇu. The ever sprouting fountain of knowledge, the unlimited source of happiness Viṣṇu is the Supreme God – Param Brahma. He is the Sanatan Brahma. This religion is based on Ekeswarvaad (monotheism) and Advaitavaad. There is none other but only the worship of Viṣṇu in the religion preached by Sankaradeva. As Lord Viṣṇu is the Param Brahma, all the other
Gods and Goddesses are a part of His being. From this point of view it is He—Lord Viṣṇu, who ought to be worshipped. It is through the worship of Lord Viṣṇu that all the other Gods and Goddesses are pleased. The main idea of the Naba-Vaishnav Dharma founded by Sankaradeva was Nishkaama Bhakti. The meaning of Nishkaama Bhakti according to Sankaradeva was total unconditional surrender before Lord Viṣṇu without expectance of any kind.¹⁰ Though the philosophical basis of the Bhakti Dharma founded by Sankaradeva seems to be a co-ordination of Advaitavaad and Vishishtadvaitavaad, in fact, it is based on the inseparable elements (abhedatwatta) of the Brahma of the Vedanta and Sri Krishna of the Gita. As like Sankaracharya, Sankaradeva too, believed in the Brahma of Vedantas. From this point of view there is a similarity between Sankaradeva and Sankaracharya¹¹. This everchanging world and life is associated with indescribable and inexpressible existence or simply Advaita self (being without duality). The conclusion associated with this point of view is nothing but Advaitavaad or Monotheism. The realization of ‘one amidst many’, ‘static within dynamism’ and the ‘unsaid within said’ helps one to identify truth from untruth. The position of Advaita and the Rasa Leela (divine play) – both of these become one and still at the central point of the ever-changing universe. Jeeva (self) gets attracted towards this point where Satt, Chit and Ananda exits. This attraction leads Jeeva closer to the central point where Jeeva proceeds to merge its self. This attempt made by Jeeva is known as Mystic Bhakti (Rahashyamoi Bhakti).¹²

In philosophy when it is believed that there is only the existence of one basic element of thing and that which is the only basis or truth as far as the universe is concerned, i.e., the belief that the whole universe has evolved from it, that belief is known as Monism. This Monism is nothing but Advaitavaad. Advaitavaad is more
inclined towards logical explanation, whereas according to Ekeswarvaad (Monotheism) there is the existence of only one God in the universe as its basis or creator; this aspect makes it different from Advaitavaad. According to Sankaracharya, the exponent of Advaitabaad, Nirguna Brahma is the only Tattva, that means it is the spiritual (Paramarthik) truth. This Nirguna Brahma is above the world and worldly ideas. On the other hand, Saguna Brahma or Iswar is but a practical truth according to him; it is not the spiritual truth. He is of the opinion that both the universe and creator of the universe are creations of Maya. Only the truth is accepted as the sole Tattva in Sankaradeva’s philosophy. Henceforth it is Advaitavaadi. In his unrelenting search of truth Sankaradeva discovered the one and only truth – Param Brahma (Absolute Brahman). In Sankaradeva’s viewpoint Param Sattya (Absolute truth) Param Brahma (Absolute Brahman) is the manifestation of the Parama Purasha (Absolute Self). This Parama Purusha (Absolute Self) is the most superior Purusha who is all present in the universe but persists outside the universe. In the Upanishadas this Parama Purusha is Satt, Atman that means the Brahma; He is described as Parama Purusha, Parameswara, Purushuttama, etc. in the various scriptures. This Purusha or Brahma is the only truth of the Universe.

The Advaitavaadi philosophy of Sankaradeva is a philosophy based on Bhaktivad where Brahma is Saguna in spite of being Nirguna, having an external existence in spite of having an internal existence. Whereas the basis of Sankaracharya’s Advaitavaad is Jñānārtha (the path of knowledge), when the external and internal existence of the Nirguna Brahma never get assimilated as Nirguna Brahma has always external existence in this world and Saguna Brahma is always of internal existence. Sankaradeva’s faith in One God, in other words to say, his objective of Ekeshwarvaad
merges with Advaitavaad where above all differences exists the ultimate Supreme; this Brahma is Saguna in spite of being Nirguna, have external existence in spite of being of internal existence; He is above mortal existence (life or death) in spite of this He takes birth as Avataar (incarnation). God is all knowing and He is inseparable from this world. There is also supra-existence of this God whose ever presence is felt in this world in His Saguna Rupa (form). The world is real and it is a real creation of God; it is not the false creation of God shrouded by Maya, nor a false notion even. According to him Brahma is none else but the Paramatma. This Paramatma and Jeevatma are one and the same, inseparable. God has created this universe through the help of Maya; that is why all life in the universe is a part of His Being. The concept of Ishwara according to this Advaita Bhaktivaad of Sankaradeva is – All life has come into being from the one and only Ishwara, all exists in that Ishwara and this Ishwara is the root or basis of all life. In this oneness philosophy of Sankaradeva Ishwara, who is the Supreme Being of the universe is described as Brahma, Param Brahma, Viśṇu, Narayan, etc. Inspite of all these, basically, He is one14. In his Kirtan Ghosha, Sankaradeva has described the qualities of Brahma as such –

"Namo Namo Madhaba Bidhir Bidhi Data |
Tumi Jagatara Gati Mati Pita Mata ||
Tumi Paramatma Jagatara Isha Eka |
Eko Bastu Nahike Tomata Byetireka ||
Tumi Karjya Karana Samaste Sarasar |
Xubarna Kundale Jena Nahike Antar ||
Tumi Pashu-Pakshi Surasura Toru Trin |
Ajanata Muhrajane Dekhe Bhin Bhin ||
(Meaning: Lord Madhaba’s name be praised who is the Master of destiny, You are the Guardian of this world, its preserver, You are the one and only Supreme of this world – the Paramatma. It is You who is the giver of result according to karma of all living beings. You reside in all living and non-living things alike. It is only those foolish ones shrouded by Ajñano who think that You are different from all these. The entire creation is enveloped by your Maya, nobody realizes that You reside within the soul of each and every one. But worldly beings hardly realize this ultimate truth about You and search for You outside, elsewhere without peeping into their within. You are the only truth in this creation, rest everything is false. It is the wise and pious minded ones who realize this wholeheartedly and search for You within their own hearts.)

3.3 The Qualified Form (Sakara Rupa) of Brahma in Ek Sharana Bhakti Dharma

As far as Sankaradeva’s Advaitavaad is concerned, glimpses of three Rupas (form) of Brahma can be seen. Those three Rupas are – firstly the concept of Nirguna Brahma, secondly the concept of Saguna Brahma as a Rupa of Brahma and thirdly, accepting Krishna Avatara as the Sakara Rupa of Brahma. But it needs to be mentioned here that actually all the three Rupas or form of Brahma are one.
Sankaradeva has mentioned that the same thing (object) or same truth (satya) can be observed as par-different mental capability and different perspectives, which is termed as ‘Motibhed’ (dissension of mind). This means that according to ‘Motibhed’ the same Saguna can be perceived in different ways. In fact Nirguna Brahma, Saguna Brahma and Krishna are one and the same. It is the Saguna Rupa of Brahma which is accepted in the Bhakti marga of Sankaradeva because in the Ek Sharana Dharma in Saguna while still being Nirguna and Sabishesha while still being Nirbishesha. The reason for this is Bhakti cannot be Rasamoyee in Nirbishesha Brahma. Farther more it is difficult for corporeal being – man to experience the existence of Nirguna Brahma and worship Him. That is why Sankaradeva has given importance to Saguna Brahma and speaks about worshiping Him. According to him, that worshiper who worships Krishna- the Saguna, Sakara Rupa of Brahma, is found to get a place in Bramhaloka. If Brahma is considered as Nirguna, Nirbishesha and Nirakar, then it moves in the direction of Shūnyavāda (nihilism). According to the Bhakti Marga or the way of devotion introduced by Sankaradeva such Brahmavada is considered uninteresting. For a devotee Brahma may be both Saguna and Nirguna; but it is the Saguna Brahma whom the devotee interacts with in the first place that becomes Nirguna in the later stage. From this point of view it is impossible to worship the Advaita Supreme being ignoring the diversity of a varied universe filled with the Leela of God.

"Tumi Sattyta Brahma Misa Jagat Srajana I
Tumar Mayaye Koroy Tumat Kalpana II
Prakrittit Ase Mattra Byabohar Dharma I
Tumisi Swarup Poripurna Parambrahma II"17

(Dosham)
(Meaning: You Brahma, are Truth, You who have created this fake world; It is by virtue of Your Maya that one can imagine of You. There is only applied Dharma in Prakriti; It is You who is the Paramabrahma wholly.)

One cannot accept this to be true that Brahma is only Nirguna or Brahma is only Saguna. This is because He has both the qualities of Nirguna and Saguna within Himself. Sankaracharya has created a complex state of affair by describing Brahma as Nirguna alone. Whereas Ramanujacharya has created the same complex state of affair by describing Brahma as only Saguna. But Sruti or Veda – the basis of both these philosophies, has clearly said that Brahma is both Saguna as well as Nirguna. The Swetaswetar Upanishad says –

"udgitmattot paramong tu brahma

tasmin triyaong supratiitsthakyarronss If"19

This means that Parabrahma is syllable itself; within Him lies Bhokta, Bhojja and Prerita (niyanta) and He is the syllable. Even though He is the shelter of abikar, prapancha, He is not Bikari, He is Abinashi.

Both Bhagavad Purana and the Mahapurushiya way of worship has given importance to the 24 elements such as Prakriti, Mana, Dasondriya, Ahankaar, Mahat, Panchantanmantra, Panchamahabhuta, etc. Prakriti is the cause of creations and Karya is nothing but the Leela of God. During the state of Leela God gets manifested as both Purusha and Prakriti. Brahma is the Only Chaitanya Shakti of this transitory world. There are two forms of Supreme Being or Brahma. The first form is His Swarupa Lakshan i.e., the abstract form and the other is His Tatastha Lakshan or the concrete form. In the abstract form He is accessible through meditation; whereas in His concrete form He is perceivable through the sense organs. As for this universe is the concrete

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form of the Brahma Himself, so also it is real like the Brahma. It is the abode of Sachhidânda. He is the combination of Ananda (pleasure), Chetana (consciousness) and Astitwa (existence). The universe has come forth from within Him; likewise it will perish in Him. In view of this Brahma is uncomparable. He is unique. According to the Chhândogya Upanishad Brahma was single and the only one before the creation came into form. After that He wished to be manifold in form. This single Self became manifold and came to be known as Purush and Prakriti. But no change came to the original Self.²⁰

Prakriti possesses two powers. These are concealment (Āvarān) and dispersion (Bikkhep). Prakriti takes the concealed form of Avidya (ignorance) and gives birth to self wisdom in the mind of Jiva (self) and Anatma (no soul) body. Dispersion is nothing but Maya of Parameswar (the Supreme Being). Purusha is also of two kinds – one is Jiva that is regulated by Prakriti. The other is Iswara who subdues Prakriti and creates the universe. Brahma is superior to both Prakriti and Purusha.

“Prakriti Purusha Duiro Niyanta Madhaba,
Samastare Aatma Hari Parama Bandhaba” ²¹

(Meaning: Madhaba is the master of both Prakriti and Purusha, Lord Hari who befriends everyone resides within all.)

So Brahma is Parameswara, He is the most revered one, He has neither beginning nor end; He is unvanquishable, formless, Grand Luster, Nirbikar and Niramay. The Swetaswata Upanishad says –

“Bhoktaa Bhogyang Preritancha Sattwaa
Sarbang Proktang Tribidhang Brahmametat ||”²²
i.e., Purusha, Prakriti and Parameswara are three feelings or realisations associated with Brahma. The realisation of Brahma which indicates Chitta and beyond description is known as Nirguna Brahma or Parama Brahma. When this nirbikar, nirbikalpa, nirupadhi, Nirguna Parambrahma gets into the garb of Maya and compresses Himself with Maya, then He becomes Sabisesh- Sabikalpa (Sakara). This implies that when a tiny speck appears in the ethereal firmament, it takes a circular motion and gradually shows up as a mid point. It is then that Brahma is known as Apara Brahma.

Sankaradeva’s religious philosophy was based on Advaitaband. The interpreters of religion such as Madhavacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Chaitanyadeva, etc. believed in Dvaitavaad (polytheism, dualism); but Sankaradeva did not believe in Dvaitavaad. There is space for Radha in the religious philosophy of Madhavacharya and others. As like the Bhagavad, Sankaradeva had no space for Radha in his Philosophy. Sankaracharya accepts the relevance of Mayaband in his Advaita thoughts. Renowned scholar Manoranjan Shashtri commented on the religious philosophy of Sankaradeva saying that Sankaradeva got inspiration from Sankaracharya, Shridhar Swami and Bishnupuri as far as his religious philosophy is concerned. Shastri said, “In the Guru - shishya tradition of Bhagawati sect there is the mention of Sri Sankaracharya, SridharaSwami and Bishnupuri. From this point of view that path of Bhakti which was introduced by them, it has been understand that the Assamese Vaishnava saints and their followers supported and practiced the same.”

Among these three, Sankaradeva was profoundly influenced by Shridhar Swami. His explanation of the Bhagavad and the Gita not only inspired Sankaradeva alone, in fact the entire Assamese Vaishnava sect came to be directed by the Bhagavad
Gita. Basically Sridhar Swami was Bhaktiwadi and it was because of his influence of Bhakti that the Advaitavaadi Sankaradeva accepted the path of Bhakti. \(^{24}\)

Sankaradeva adopted Ek Sharana from the Gita, Sat Sanga from the Bhagavad, the essence of Sahasrra Naam from the Padma Purana and founded the ‘Ek Sharana Hari Naam Dharma’\(^{25}\). Sankaradeva’s disciple Madhabdeva too, described his religion as Ek Sharana Hari Naam Dharma. Madhabdeva said that Ek Sarana Harinaam Dharma is predominant among all the religions mentioned in the Vedas. In regard to this he has expressed in the Naam-Ghosha that all other religions mentioned in the Veda are nothing but subjects of Harinaam. He who sings and chants of Harinaam is the best among men. Uninterrupted Bhakti is the only path of practising the Ek Sarana Harinaama Dharma founded by Sankaradeva. The above mentioned lines imply that a bond of attachment arises within the heart of one who sings or chants the glory of a special person or God. It is significant to note that in the Mahapurushiya Bhakti marga the urge to merge into the Supreme Being (paramaatma) isn’t noticeable as far as the intensity of Bhakti is concerned. Such nature of Bhakti is unacceptable in the Mahapurushiya Bhakti marga. So it can be affirmed that though initially the Bhakti marga of Sankaradeva seems to be Dvaitabaadi (polytheistic, dualistic) Bhakti, in reality it is but Advaitabaadi Bhakti. At the ultimate stage of realization when the Bhakta feels that “tumi paramatmaa jagotar isha ek, eku bostu nahike tomato biyotireko” (O Lord, you are One, Paramatmaa, there is no thing other then you), or “somosta bhutore tumise atma, hridoior param guru, tathapi sewaro anusare kripa kara jen kalpatoro” (You are the soul of the entire world, You are the giver of knowledge that nurtures the soul. Inspite of this You shower Your mercy as like the wish fulfilling Holy tree like Kalpataru) it is then that the faithful realizes the Advaita theory (monism). It is from this

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\(^{24}\) Sankaradeva's adoption of Ek Sharana from the Gita, Sat Sanga from the Bhagavad, the essence of Sahasrra Naam from the Padma Purana

\(^{25}\) Madhabdeva's description of his religion as Ek Sharana Hari Naam Dharma

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viewpoint that the Dharma propagated by Sankaradeva can be termed as ‘Bhakti mārga Advaitavaadi’ or Advaitavaadi in the way of Bhakti mārga.

The worship of Lord Krishna in idol form is also a notable aspect in regard to *Ek Sharana Bhaktivaad*. Some are of the opinion that as God is formless, endless, Nirguna there cannot be any such form nor replica or idol of Him. Of course there are differences of opinion in this regard as well. Instead of the different idols of Lord Krishna, Sankaradeva placed the Bhagawad with reverence at the *Guru Ashana*. Inspite of this, till now, it can be seen that in some Satras (institutions) there exists the idol of Lord Krishna. The Kirtanghar at Barpeta district can be cited as an example. In the Kirtan composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva, he has said that liberation (of the soul) is possible only if the devotee meditates upon the form of God in his heart and chant Ram Naam.25

“Hari Kirtane Mohapatokok
Jimote Kore Nirjyjan
Aan Praiocitte Pobittra Koribe
Noware Taar Saaman”
(Dwitiya Kirtan)

(Meaning: It is through the chanting of Hari’s name that even the biggest sin can be attoned. All other processes of attonement become insignificant before the chanting of Hari’s name.)

From the above discussion it has been understood that Sankaradeva adopted the Sakara Rupa (Qualified Form) of Brahma for the spreadth of Bhakti. He adopted the Bhagavad as the Sakara Rupa (Qualified Form) of Sri Krishna and held it in high esteem. The ideal of Sri Krishna is the basic of the Bhagavad. It is through this Holy
Scripture that mankind has come to know about the ideal form of Sakara Brahma (i.e. Sri Krishna). Sankaradeva wanted to mould the common masses mind towards this ideal realization of the Bhagavad Purana. The attractive and spontaneous appeal of the numerous chapters of the Bhagavad mesmerized the devoted soul to the full. Devotees in quest of Bhakti and the Supreme Power took refuge in the Sakara Rupa of Brahma and tried to attain spiritual fulfilment. Sankaradeva too, was marveled by the Divine Personality of Sri Krishna – the embodiment of Sakara Brahma (Qualified Brahma).

Another significant revelation of the Bhagavad is this that Sri Krishna is the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. So Sri Krishna and Lord Viṣṇu are one and the same. In view of this while some venerates the idol of Lord Viṣṇu, others show the same veneration towards the Bhagavad.

3.4 The four entities and its significance in Ek Šarania Dharma

In the Mahapurushiya way of worship these four entities namely Guru, Deva, Naam and Bhakta has much significance. In the real sense these four entities maintain link with the Chaturbarga of Purusartha in Indian Philosophy namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha.

Guru means the one from whom knowledge is acquired. According to the Vaishnava belief Lord Krishna is considered as Guru. In the interpretation of the Bhagavad by Sankaradeva, it seems that he has given space to both the Saguna and Nirguna form of God. He is of the opinion that one can realize God through the path of knowledge. But it is through His benevolence that one can attain liberation of the soul. That is why Bhakti is the true path or marga. Sankaradeva has indicated that it is through Bhakti that one can attain knowledge and knowledge leads to Moksha or
liberation of the soul. He is of the opinion that Bhakti is far more higher in position rather than Jñāna, Yoga and Karma. He acknowledged Lord Krishna as his Guru and spread the Bhakti Dharma as such –

“Somostto Bhutore Tumihe Aatma
Hridaya Parama Guru
Tathapi Sewaro Onuxare Kripa
Kora Jeno Kalpatoru”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: You are the soul of the entire world, You are the giver of knowledge that nurtures the soul. Inspite of this You shower Your mercy as like the wish fulfilling Kalpataru tree.)

Sankaradeva surrenders his entire being before the Supreme Lord of the universe i.e., Lord Viṣṇu or Sri Krishna. He realizes it wholeheartedly that Lord Viṣṇu or Sri Krishna occupies his soul and mind. In return the Lord showers His blessing upon Sankaradeva. For him Lord Viṣṇu is that eternal wish filling tree – the celestial Kalpotoru. This realization of eternal contentment has made an overwhelming affect on the Bhakta Sankaradeva. In this way the renowned saint – preacher made complete surrender before Lord Sri Krishna and preached Bhakti Dharma enshrining Lord Sri Krishna in his heart. He has written in the Kirtan Ghosha-

“Tumaro Pawote Loile Jijone Sharan
Taju Gun Naam Kore Sraban Kirtan II”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: one who surrenders himself before You, he would sing and listen to Your glory.)
The bhakta knows nothing but his divine Lord Sri Krishna. It is Sri Krishna who is his only concern. Such a Bhakta always keep himself engrossed in meditation of Sri Krishna in both his waking and sleeping hours. Sankaradeva was such a sincere Bhakta who was thoroughly devoted to Lord Sri Krishna.

This ethereal realization of Sankaradeva inspired him to write –

“Tumi Paramatma Tattwa Janilu Samprati
Satya Murti Dhori Sadha Bhakatora Goti.”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning : I have come to realize that you are the Essence – the Paramatma. You take the form of Truth (satya) and liberate the Bhaktas. )

The Vaishnava sect has divided Guru into four types: Ista Guru (Sri Krishna), Upakari Guru (one who advises on the scriptures), Anjaniya Guru (teacher) and Suhriday Guru (bhakta guru)

Sankaradeva has described himself as a follower (sishya) and said –

“Tumi Je Parama Guru Bhakatara Kalpataru Jana Tumi Muro Chitta.”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: You are the Supreme teacher / Guru, the kalpataru tree of the Bhaktos; nothing within my heart and soul is hidden from You.)

Deva is the symbol of knowledge as well as its (jñana’s) developed form. The revered son of Dwaivaki i.e., Sri Krishna is the only deity in the Eksharania Dharma. Madhabdeva has mentioned in his Naamghosha that Guru or teacher is the helmsman of the boat through which one can cross the sea of allusion related to the materialistic world. This allusion or Maya is always there in man’s way to create some
inconvenience in life. But just like the much needed even flow of the wind which flows in the right direction, so also the Deva (i.e., Sri Krishna) shows his benevolence and guides man towards the right path. In the words of Madhabdeva —

“Guru Bhoilo Tato Karnadharo, Krishna Bhoilo Onukula Bayu.”

(Naam Ghosha)

That means the concept of Deva developing from within Sri Krishna which culminates into the body form of Sri Krishna.

Naam is the foremost element of the Mahapurushiya Bhakti Dharma. It is through the practice of Naam that the three tasks — Sravana, Kirtana and Niddhiyanahan are accomplished. Listening to and singing the glory of Hari as Harinaam is the only path to attain liberation (of the soul) and practice of Bhakti in the Koli Yuga. In view of this Sankaradeva has said —

“Jahar Jihbai a Nubule Viṣṇur
Gun Naam Sarbakhyan
Jijonar Mone Hridoy Padmat
Nishinte Krishnar Saran II
Jijonar Sire Nakare Pranam
Krishnar Pada Komale
Tat Mur Daii Neribi Hodai
Bandhi Aan Haat Gole II”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: one who does not care to pronounce the name of Lord Viṣṇu, one who doesn’t think of Lord Krishna in his heart; one who doesn’t care to bow at
According to Sankaradeva, there is scope of spiritual salvation of Jeeva only if they praise and sing (sravana – kirtana) the glory of Hari naama. As for it is through Sravana Kirtana that jeeva can attain Moksha or Salvation, so there is much significance of Naam in the Mahapurushiya way of worship.

The fourth significant element in the Ek Sharania tradition of worship is Bhakat. An inquisitive person accomplishes his task well. At the same time he follows the Jñana mārga and realizes the presence of the omnipresent Divine Power amongst the beauty and power of nature in all her vastness. He is the one who can be termed as a genuine Bhakat. A Bhakat can be classified into three kinds – Uttam, Madhyam and Prakrita Bhakat. Among these four major elements included in the Sadhan mārga of Sankaradeva namely Guru, Deva, Naam and Bhakat, Bhakat is the foremost – one who is capable of performing specific form of Sadhana. According to the religion founded by Sankaradeva, one can attain God if one gets into the company of such a Bhakta. Sankaradeva has cited –

“Aan Karma Koriaa Misate Pore Loka
Bhakatar Sangat Saymmyak Pawe Muka I”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: People need not waste their time doing other types of Karma; it is in the company of Bhakat that you can get me.)

From the above explanation it can be said that it is through the association of a Bhakat that one can achieve God. But that Bhakat ought to be the one whose
characteristic features are being described above. So, there is much significance of Bhakat in Ek Sharana Naam Dharma founded by Srimanta Sankaradeva.

3.5 Nine elements of Bhakti

Social reform was the topmost priority of Sankaradeva. This aspect proved resourceful for the followers of his religious cult. The religion preached by Sankaradeva was universal, practical and liberal in its outlook; moreover it was very much appealing and acceptable for those whom his religion was directed at. He believed that publication of rules and regulations of the scriptures alone won’t be enough if no such method of popularizing those rules and regulations among the masses and educate them on it is fulfilled. In addition to this he felt that rigidity found in those rules and regulations must be removed without hurting the religious sentiments associated to those rules and regulations. At the same time indiscipline and chaos, major deviations etc. need to be controlled with a firm hand. For this purpose he chose Bhakti as the tool for social reform. Sankaradeva has mentioned it in the Kirtan Ghosha that a Bhakta can observe nine ways of worship. According to Bhakti these nine paths of worship are – Sravana, Kirtana, Smarana, Archana, Padasewana, Bandana, Dashya, Sakhitwa and Aatmanivedana. In the Kirtan Ghosha Sankaradeva has said –

"Sravana Kirtana Smarana Viṣṇu
Archana Padasewana
Dashya Sakhitwa Bandana Viṣṇu
Koribo Deha Arpana
Nobidha Bhakti Viṣṇu Aacare
Sehise Path Uttam II³⁰

(Kirtan Ghosha)
Sankaradeva has given much stress on Sravana and Kirtana among these nine ways of worship. According to him these two ways are the most significant ones in the process of expression of Bhakti.

“Joddyapi Bhakati Nawabidha Madhabar
Sravan Kirtan Tatu Moha Sresthatar” II

(\textit{Bhagavad, pratham skandha})

(Meaning: though there are nine kinds of Bhakti, Yet Sravana and Kirtana is the best)

An attempt to discuss these ways of Bhakti is as follows –

**Sravana:** The term Sravana means to hear the glory of Lord Viṣṇu in the lips of a Bhakta. It can also be explained as listening to the exploits and Lēelas of Lord Viṣṇu and His different incarnations. His Leelas can be divided into four types. These are – Creation (Sristi), Subsistence (Sthiti), Destruction (Loy) and Incarnation (Avataar).

“Krishnaak bulanta Sristri Sthiti Loy
Arthe jitu jagatar
Leela a aasiya hua Avatar
Param tumi Iswar II” \textit{ (Bhakti Ratnakar)}

(Meaning: Krishna is said to be the Creator, Preserver as well as Destroyer of this Universe. Krishna is the Supreme Lord of this Universe. It is through His numerous incarnations that Lord Krishna determines the fate of the Universe.)

When one sings the glory of the Lord by himself aloud or listens to someone singing or speaking such glory of God, one can also term this as Sravana. The followers of the Bhakti marga believe that all ills and evils in the human mind diminish when the
name of Sri Krishna or Lord Visnu is being uttered. Secondly Sravana liberates the mind of fear.

“Krishna Kotha Sravanat Sudha Hoiwo Mon I
Sarbodoi Koribek Krishna Kirtan II
Krishnar Saran Sintiweko Hridoiyat I
Aasontta Iswar Hari Samasta Bhutat II
Hen Jani Pranadhiko Koriba Satkar I
Teshebe Krishnat Rati Hoibet Tumar II
Hari Sewat Kisu Nahike Prayash I
Apuni Loiwanta Hari Hridoiwat Baash II”

(Kirtan ghosha)

(Meaning: listening to the name of Lord Krishna cleanses one’s mind of impurity, one should always sing the glorious name of Lord Krishna; The imprint of the name of Lord Krishna lay within the heart as His existence is felt in each and every particle of this Universe. Pay reverence to the Divine Lord with all your heart, it is then that Krishna’s name will remaine intact in your soul. One need not toil to get Hari, Hari Himself takes his positions within the pure heart.)

Listening to the naam, achievement, glory and virtues of God; paying attention to the discourse of the Bhakats – all these are features of Sravana Bhakti. There can be found some special category of bhakats in the Sattras of Assam. They are known as ‘Shravanis’. Their duty is to listen to the discourse of the Bhagavad whenever there is reading of Bhagawad within sattra (a religious institution in Assam) premises. The objective of such an implementation is to make the congregation of Bhaktas aware
of the significance of Sravana. It has been clearly mentioned in the ‘Bhakti Ratnakara’ about the positive outcome of Sravana-

“The one who eagerly listens to the glory of Sri Krishna, it is he in whose heart lies the abode of Lord Narayana; fear and hesitation disappear from the mind of that person and the worldly bindings such as lust, greed, infatuation, maya etc. leave his heart for good and swells up with Bhakti.

(Meaning : The one who eagerly listens to the glory of Sri Krishna, it is he in whose heart lies the abode of Lord Narayana; fear and hesitation disappear from the mind of that person and the worldly bindings such as lust, greed, infatuation, maya etc. leave his heart for good and swells up with Bhakti...
towards Narayana. Moreover he who listens to the glory of Hari, perceives God in all living things in the universe. It is through the Sravana of the glory of Hari that a devotee or bhakta’s mind gets free from arrogance and the zeal to do karma sprouts in his mind.)

**Kirtana:** The meaning of Kirtana is to sing as prayer to God. In other words to say it is the singing the glory of Hari and carry discourse on Hari. This kirtana can be profound in two ways – both singularly and in a congregation. The kirtana performed in a congregation is enjoyable as like Sravana. Some people like to term this type of kirtana as Sangkirtana. Kirtana can be categorized into five types – naamuccharan (praise, especially praise and prayers offered to Viṣṇu), stutipath, kothabyakhya, geet (song), abhinoy (act).³⁵ Sankaradeva has said that it is through Harinaam kirtana that a Bhakta or devotee or Bhakta gets closer to God. It is He who delivers the Bhakta from the circle of the caresome world. That is why it has been quoted in the Bhakti Ratnakara –

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"Sakami Hakale Pawe Karmafala
Harir Naam Kirtane I
Naamor Kirtane Moksha Phal Pawe
Jotek Mumukhyagone II"
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(Bhakti Ratnakar)

(Meaning: It is through the chanting of Hari’s name that the Sakamis attain fruit of their devotion towards Hari; whereas it is through the glorification of Hari’s name i.e. Naam Kirtan that one can attain Moksha.)

Even though Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva said that liberation of the soul is possible through means of Naam Kirtana, yet it doesn’t mean that one should
chant the name of Hari as like Ajamil on his death bed; in fact one must be habituated in
taking the name of Hari. God is always there with such a Bhakta —

“Sravana Kirtana Jar Aabhyasha
Nosarontta Hori Tahar Paasha II”
(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: One who is habituated to the listening and chanting of Hari’s name, it is him
whom Hari never leaves.)

Sankaradeva was amazed at the impact of Naam kirtana and expressed his
view that it is only through Hari Naam Kirtana that even the worst of sinners can get
deliverance from his sufferings through Naam Kirtana —

“Pancchaam Mohapapi Jitujon
Taru Praiccitta Hari Kirtan II”
(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: The sinner who falls in the fifth category, for him too, atonement is possible
through the chanting of Hari’s name.)

Moreover Sankaradeva has also indicated that even a Chandala can achieve the highest
status by means of Hari naam kirtana. In other words to say if a Chandala chants
(kirtana) the name of Hari with a pure heart, Lord Narayana would make an abode in his
heart —

“Tomaro Namor Ananta Mohima
Aacharya Ati Parama
Naamo Matro Loile Chandalo Dehote
Howe Oti Shresthatama.
(Bhakti Ratnakar)
Sankaradeva never gave importance to lavish rituals like yagya (a sacrifice, a ceremony in which oblations are offered), tap-jap (religious austerity), visiting holy shrines of different places, chanting of the Vedas, idol worship etc. as far as Hari Bhakti is concerned. In fact he was quite against idol worship and other lavish rituals.

This particular stand of the social reformer cum religious founder Sankaradeva was unacceptable for the conservative Brahmin class who were quite devoted to idol worship and other kinds of ritualistic worship. So Sankaradeva faced strong resistance from the Brahmin class then. But Sankaradeva justified his stand explaining that all such religious rituals and discourse of the Vedas are included in Hari naam kirtana itself. So, simply singing the glory of God is enough for a Bhakta. According to him if a bhakta doesn’t do Hari Naam Kirtana and simply go on visiting holy shrines, perform rituals, etc. his Bhakti won’t be completed. It has been quoted in the Bhakti Ratnakara -

"Tap – Jap – Tirtha
Aadi Dharma Jot Jot I
Jehetu Tumar
Naam Kirtanor
Huya Aase Antargarta II"

(Bhakti Ratnakar)

(Meaning: All kind of religious rituals like Tapa, Japa, recitating of the Vedas, Yogya performance, going on pilgrimage etc are elements that fall within the chanting of Hari’s name.)

Smarana: The meaning of Smarana is to remember the form and name of Lord Viṣṇu.

In other words to say Smarana is to recollect the name and form of Hari in one’s heart.
one’s heart. Recollecting the name of God in one’s mind, meditating His form and chanting hymns in His name - all these fall in the category of Smarana. That state when there is spontaneous chanting of Hair’s name within the heart — that is said to be the ultimate stage of Smarana. Even though Sankaradeva has made his opinion clear that Sravana – Kirtana is the best way of Bhakti. But if seen from a different perspective it can be said that the utility and significance of Smarana is much more than Sravana – kirtana. This is so because it is not convenient to practice Sravana and kirtana all throughout the day. Smarana, on the other hand, is free from such barriers or constraints. That Bhakta who remembers the name of Hari during each and every second of his waking hours, is bound to get liberated from worldly ties. Sankaradeva has mentioned in Bhakti Ratnakara –

"Krishnar Sharan Sada Smare Jitu
Paap Mane Huwe Khyoi
Huwe Citta Suddhi Krishna Pawe Buddhi
Nistha Huwe Atishoi II
Krishna Pawe Eksharana Poshia
Krishnok Sada Smoroi
Huwe Pap Khyoi Mukuti Pawoi
Ehishe Bhoilo Nirnoy II" (Bhakti Ratnakar)

(Meaning : He who remembers the name of Lord Krishna, his sins are bound to lessen; impurity leaves his heart and Lord Krishan blesses him with knowledge, he attain mental steadiness. Believe in none but Lord Krishna always remembers his name, sin lessens and one attains salvation.)
Archana: The meaning of Archana is formal or informal way of worship. In other words to say, when any form of Lord Viṣṇu is imagined and is worshipped as par rituals, then it is known as Archana. Archana is of two forms – mental archana and superficial or external archana. Where the self surrender of a Bhakta gains prominence, it is mental archana. So, this type of archana can also be termed as surrender. The external or superficial archana is termed as Surauppachar, aashana, padyaghya, aachaman, sringar etc. this is what that Surauppachar is. There is no such mention of surauppachar in the writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. From this it can be well understood that Sankaradeva didn’t make practical use of this process as far as his Bhakti Dharma is concerned. He was of the opinion that mental archana performed through the Nishkama way is much more affective and fruitful. Money, gold or other valuables aren’t essential items of this type of ritual occasion like prayer. Money or riches cannot satisfy Lord Viṣṇu. It is the pure Bhakti sprouting from within the heart that is the only affective thing of prayer like Surauppachar of this type of Archana. This very aspect of mental archana has also been quoted in the Bhakti Ratnakara –

“Kohu Aawe Archana Bandana Madhabara I
Ek Cite Mone Suniuoko Sadhu Nara II
Jole Phule Potre Mattré Hari Pujibeko I
Aalosiaa Monot Nissoy Korileko II
Etekote Priti Huya Prabhu Bhagobanta I
Parampod Boykunthak Dibako Khujonta II
Kripalu Krishnargun Kohano Najaoi I
Natu Puja Koronte Purbotte Puja Paio II”

(Bhakti Ratnakara)
(Meaning: Lend your ears so that I may speak of the Glory of Madhava—the virtue of paying reverence to Him, ye pious man! Do listen carefully. Take a firm decision to worship Hari and Hari alone in various elements such as water, flower and leaves. God will be pleased with such devotion and surely grant such a man a place in heaven like Baikuntha. Such is the divine quality of the benevolent Lord Krishna that humble submission at His feet can do well to the worshiper.)

**Padasewana:** The meaning of padasewana is paying veneration to God at His feet by the Bhaktas. In other words to say, when some idol is symbolized as God and His presence, Being and existence is felt in it and revered as such then this kind of Bhakti is known as Padasewana. The worship of the idol of God, Guru, Bhagavad, Bhakta etc are the initial stages of Padasewana. Getting accustomed to such way of worship, a Bhakta becomes overwhelmed with Dashya Bhakti and attains steadfastness of mind. In such a state of mind this type of Bhakti acquires the ability to meditate upon the abstract form of paramatma and venerate at His feet. A bhakta thinks of himself as a Dasha (servant) when he concentrates on his duty towards God. This thought of the Bhakta that he is a Dasha (servant) of God opens up the path towards the realization of the perfect stage of Daishya, sakhittwa and aatmanivedana. It has been rightly quoted in the Kirtanghosha—

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"Bhabo Boytoroni           Maje Moji Luhu I
Nere Muk Shuka Bhoio II
Tumar Sarane              Sharan Poshilo I
Kripa Kora Kripamoi II"
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(Kirtan Ghosha)
The maladies of this mundane world has made one confused and lost, liberate me from fear, O Benevolent Lord! I seek refuge at Your feet.

Bandana: The meaning of Bandana Bhakti is Namaskara (to pay veneration to God). In other words to say Bandana Bhakti is nothing but meditate upon and fill up one’s heart with the glorified name and virtues of God and pray for His blessings. Bandana Bhakti can be classified into two types - Prema Bhakti and Sadharana Bhakti. It has been quoted in the Bhakti Ratnakara -

"Prema Bhave Bhave Jitu Iswar Krishnaka I
Ki Kohibu Tewe Aar Tahar Bhaigyaka II
Iswab Bosan Aushare Ekamone I
Poshiaa Sharan Ek Krishnar Sharane II
Sadharan Bhakotio Krishnak Pawoi I
Prem Bhokotir Kotha Ki Koibe Lagoi II"

(Bhakti Ratnakara)

(Meaning: Oh! Little can be spoken about the exceptional luck of those lucky ones who seek Lord Krishna out of love! Such a lover or devotee seeks nothing but humble submission at the feet of Lord Krishna. One can attain the blessings of Lord Krishna by doing simple devotion. It is needless to say what blessings one may get while practicing Prema Bhakti in order to attain the blessings of Lord Krishna.)

In Bandana Bhakti there is the existence of God in each and every life form. In view of this one should pay reverence to every life form (jeeva) as for paying reverence to God means paying reverence to God Himself. This particular aspect of Bandana Bhakti is found in the Bhakti Ratnakara -
“Jal Vayu Bohni Mohi Nakhyattra Aakasha I
Brikhya Nadi Samudra Tothastha Disha Pasho II
Aase Aan Sansaror Bostu Joto Joto I
Krishnak Dekhibo Mattra Mone Samosttat II
Harir Sharer Itu Heno Budhi Kori I
Sarbangak Namoshkar Koribo Shadori II”

(Bhakti Ratnakara)

(Means: The light wind and stars in the sky together with the trees, rivers, oceans and all the directions and all other things and elements which exists in this Universe, are all which have the existence of Lord Krishna; showing respect to all these things and elements is nothing but showing our respect to Lord Hari.)

Dashya: The meaning of Dashya Bhakti is self - surrender and pay veneration to God as His ‘Servant’ (Dasha). In other words to say Dashya Bhakti is nothing but to exhibit total trust and faith in Bhakti towards God; to show one’s gratitude towards the Lord, follow His orders and direction as like a servant, accomplish tasks that pleases God and abstain from doing tasks that goes against God, etc.. The bhakta must obtain himself from such feelings like ‘my’, ‘mine’ etc. as far as the philosophy of Dashya Bhakti is concerned. Sankaradeva’s favourite disciple Madhavdeva himself, was a clear manifestation of Dashya Bhava. As long as a Bhakti doesn’t make complete surrender at the feet of Lord Viṣṇu, until then he cannot unbind himself from the ties of this materialistic world. Until then liberation of his soul is a far cry away. It is then when a Bhakta (devotee) treats himself as Daishya (servant) of God that he unbinds himself.
from worldly ties and gain Moksha. Madhavadeva has quoted in his prominent philosophical work Bhakti Ratnawali –

“Daishya Bhawa Mukti Aako Bulio Nissoyo I
Koiyo Bakkya Mone Joto Karma Samorpoi II
Loukik Boidik Brahmanodir Swabhabe I
Samastak Arpibo Kirshnar Dui Pawe II”

(Bhakti Ratnawali)

(Meaning : It is through Dashya Bhava that Mukti or salvation is possible, one should surrender one’s Karma in totality; whether be it worldly matters or spiritual affairs, it is at the feet of Krishna that one should surrender everything.)

Similarly, according to Sankaradeva,

“Raghupati Houk Goti
Tumar Charane Narayan
Das Buli Damudar
Diyuko Sharan”

(Kirtana- Ghosha)

(Meaning: Ye Lord Raghupati! I am at your feet, Narayana! do give me shelter as your slave, O Lord Damodara)

_Sakhitwa or Sakhya_: Sakhitwa or Sakhya means friendship. This implies that one can worship God as His friend or fellowmate. To think of God or Paramatma as one’s fellowmate, friend, partner and dear one who assists the other all through thick and thin in life is nothing but Sakhya Bhakti. In the general sense that with whom a person grows deeply attached to in the bond of friendship trust him whole heartedly. Having
such unconditional faith on the other person is termed as Sakhitwa (friendship). An actual Bhakti sees God as his friend (sakhi) and places unconditional faith and trust upon Him. A real friend never leaves behind his friend at the time of danger, instead he stand strong beside his friend in trouble and helps him out. In the same way God never ignores the plight of an actual Bhakta. He helps the Bhakta to get relief from his plight. God never leaves His actual Bhakta lonely and helpless. The large heartedness of the Divine Being is beyond doubt. God’s nature is such that if His Bhakta steps on the path of sin or wrong, He rescues him from the path of sin and save him. In fact God – as his friend, acts as his guide and unimpeachable friend. It has been quoted in the Kirtana Ghosha –

“Ram Bula Ram Bula Lokai
Ram Naam Bina Bandhabo Naai”

(Kirtan Ghosha)

(Meaning: All people utter Rama-Rama; because there is no friend other than Lord Rama.)

Aatmanivedana: Aatmanivedana means the complete surrender of one’s body before God. In this type of Bhakti a Bhakta makes complete surrender before God with all his body, mind and soul. This is such a state when the Bhakta unhesitantly confesses his wrong, weakness and all other vices at the feet of the Lord. This surrender of self before God is the ultimate stage of Bhakti. This is why this type of Bhakti can also be termed as Sharanagati. The Kirtana Ghosha speaks of this Sharanagati Bhakti as such-

“Gopalo Gubinda Jadu Nandana I
Kirshnar Charane Loilu Sharano II

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(Kirtana Ghosha)

(Meaning: Hey Gopala! Hey Gobinda! Hey Jadu Nandana! Ye Lord Krishna! I seek refuge at Your feet. Have pity on me, O Lord Damodara! Hey Jadaba Nandana! O You benevolent Lord! Do save me Lord! I fall at Your feet. I surrender at Your feet, Lord!)

From the above discussion of the nine elements of Bhakti it has been seen that Sankaradeva has given importance to Sravana and kirtana. The Dashya Bhakti is quite prominent in the Bhakti Dharma propagated by Sankaradeva. Inspite of the fact that shanta, Dashya, Vatsallya and Madhura bhava are various stages of Bhakti, the Madhura Bhava is absent in the Bhakti Dharma of Sankaradeva. In view of the greater welfare of the common masses, Sankaradeva with a very far sighted gesture, excluded Madhura Bhava associated with Radha from his Bhakti Dharma altogether. In other words to say, Sankaradeva didn't associate the character of Radha with Sri Krishna in his Bhakti Dharma. Instead of this Dashya Bhava and Sakhya Bhava is prominent in his Bhakti Dharma.

3.6 The main features of Sankaradeva’s Vaishnava Bhakti

During his religious tour to different holy shrines of India Sankaradeva came to know of the Vaishnava movement taking place in different parts of India. After his arrival at his homeland, Sankaradeva gave full time and effort in the spreadth of the
Vaishnava Dharma in Assam. Similar to the other parts of India, in Assam too, the Bhakti Dharma played a significant role in the rise of the Naba Vaishnava movement in Assam. Sankaradeva gave stretch on the social and spiritual upliftment of the weak and backward in society and this was what that was the aim and objective of Bhakti Dharma propagated by him. The Bhakti Dharma preached by Sankaradeva not only created the feeling of spiritualism in the mind of the masses, but it also created awareness of the social values among the people. He composed Geet (Songs), Padas (lyric), Kavya (a poetical work, poesy), Poetry, Natok (drama), Abhinaya (acting), Bhaowna (traditional Assamese religious musical drama) etc. for the spreadth of Bhakti Dharma. He directed and presented Bhaownas, Drama, etc. in front of the illiterate masses so as to make them aware of the various leelas (play) of Sri Krishna and inspire them to choose the path of Bhakti Dharma. He realized it wholeheartedly that if a new idea or view is to be made acceptable by the masses, one must take the help of art and literature. The impact of art and literature is such that it can sustain an idea or view for a long time. This realization inspired Sankaradeva to compose Geet, Pada, Abhinaya, Bhaowna, etc. Through his Bhaowna Sankaradeva spread the teachings of God (Sri Krishna) among the masses in society. In the course of time this novel effort of Sankaradeva bore fruit. A strong cultural foundation came into being in the Assamese society. This effort went a long way in creating a harmonious state of affairs among different sects in the Assamese society then. His creative literature went a long way in the unification of ideas of numerous groups in the Assamese society. Moreover it enriched Assamese literature to a large extent. The Bhakti movement of Sankaradeva touched the hearts of many. It gave strong footings to the Naba Vaishnava Dharma in Assam. Some basic features of the Naba Vaishnava Dharma are as follows –
(a) "The Bhakti dharma propagated by Sankaradeva is mainly based on Sri Krishna. Of course Sankaradeva didn’t deny the importance of the other Hindu Gods and Goddesses. But it was the complete incarnation (Purna Avatara) of Viṣṇu – Sri Krishna, who came to be recognized as the Parama purusha parameshwara. Among the Dasha Avatara of Viṣṇu, Srirama has gained much significance. The Vaishnava saints of Assam sees no difference between Sri Krishna and Srirama (Ramachandra)

(b) In the Naba Vaishnava Bhakti mārga founded by Sankaradeva Bhakti has been accepted as the most summunbonum. He has given much importance to Sravana –Kirtana aspect among nine elements of Bhakti (nava bidha bhakti). In Sankaradeva’s view Bhakti was far superior to Mukti (free from maya). Moreover he believed that faith was the basis of Bhakti.

(c) Sankaradeva doesn’t believe in the religious rituals and visit to holy shrines mandatory as far as Bhakti is concerned.

(d) Sankaradeva was of the opinion that there is no significance of extravagancy in performing rituals, nor yagnas, yoga or penance in Bhakti Dharma founded by him.

(e) Sankaradeva has clearly said that there is relevance of sat sanga (good companion) and guru in the Naam Dharma founded by him. Moreover he added that the four entities namely Naam, Deva, Guru and Bhakat are interlinked with one another.

(f) Sankaradeva preached the feeling of universalism through the Vaishnava Bhakti Dharma. Through this noble gesture he spread the message of love, sympathy, non – violence etc."
(g) “The basic scripture of the Naba Vaishnava Dharma founded by Sankaradeva was Srimad Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavad Purana.

(h) The main objective of the Bhakti Dharma founded by Sankaradeva was the upliftment of the social and spiritual status of the downtrodden and neglected masses.

(i) Each and every man was equal in the eyes of Sankaradeva. He did not believe in cast system, religion, sect, language etc.

(j) Sankaradeva’s dharma gave stress on Dashya bhava and Vatsallya bhava. There is no space for madhura bhava in his Bhakti Dharma. According to Goudiya Vaishnava Dharma Krishna was incomplete without Radha as Radha was Krishna’s power (Shakti). The relationship between Radha and Krishna was based on Sapreema Bhakti which Chaitanyadeva expressed through Madhurjya bhava. But Sankaradeva felt that the overflow of Madhurjya bhava would create some obstacle and so Sankaradeva discarded this Bhava from his religion altogether. Instead of this he included the plain Vatsallya and Dashya bhava and gave importance to these both.”

3.7 General Estimate

A thorough overview of the subject matter taken for discussion in this particular chapter materialises at some significant conclusion. As a matter of fact ‘Sankaradeva and his concept of Bhakti’ is one of the most important parts as far as this research work is concerned. Analyzing the philosophy of the religious founder, saint, philosopher, litterateur, social reformer Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva is no easy task. This saint – philosopher of the mediaeval ages and the most prominent figure of
the Bhakti movement in the north eastern part of India founded the Ek Sharana Naam Dharma. The religious philosophy of the Ek Sarana Naam Dharma is based on the Bhagavad Purana. The new religion founded by Sankaradeva came as a challenge to the then conservative society in Assam. The society at that time was accustomed to the numerous and lavish type of ritualistic worship. Such worship is based on Karma – Kanda.

Religious life of people in society is closely associated with the greater social life with all its ups and downs. The religious life of people during Sankaradeva’s time too, saw changes, conflict and exploitation at a different level. The ever ready social reformer within Sankaradeva tried to find a remedy to this malady. Keeping this in mind he founded the Ek Sarana Naam Dharma where a devotee or Bhakta gets the liberty to associate himself with God at his own free will. Some Brahmin priests of rigid mentality and self interest as well exploited the common people in the name of religion then. But Sankaradeva followed an easier, convenient method to mobilize the masses. In his preaching he said that it is through Bhakti that anyone can get access to God easily. Chanting of God’s name aloud or silently and with pure dedication can do wonders. In the Bhagavad Purana – the main basic of Sankaradeva’s religion, one can come across several stories and details where the chanting of Lord Viṣṇu or Narayan’s name delivered even worst sinners from the circle of rebirth. In two most prominent work of Sankaradeva – Kirtana Ghosha and Bhakti Ratnakara this notable aspect of chanting the name of Lord Viṣṇu (Narayana) or His numerous incarnations such as Hari, Rama, Sri Krishna, etc. helps a Bhakta to achieve Moksha (spiritual liberation). The Bhagavad and Narada sutra too, speaks of Bhakti indicating its significance as far as quest of God or Paramatma is concerned. Furthermore, Sri Krishna Himself, has said
in the Gita that it is through the co-ordination of Karma- Jñāna – Bhakti that Ek Sharana becomes a reality.

Sankaradeva worked for the popularization of his new religion among the masses not only through the process of religious discourses and chantings, but also through means of art and literature. His target group was the general masses. These were illiterate groups who were an exploited lot both economically and spiritually. The great social reformer and religious teacher Sankaradeva wanted to bring an end to such double standards maintained by the higher groups in society. His Bhakti Dharma was very simple to follow. Moreover its utility was well appreciated in the long run.
References

2. Ibid, p.110
4. Ibid, pp.197-201
14. Ibidpp.154


19. ibid, pp. 5-6


24. ibid, p. 31


31. Ibid, p. 6


36. Ibid, p. 12
