



The Living Legacy of Naam-Prasanga in Assam: A Study of its Religious and Philosophical Foundations

Author: Debraj Buragohain

MA in Cultural Studies, Tezpur University

Ritishma Priyadarshana Britial

MA in Cultural Studies, Tezpur University

Abstract

Naam Prasanga, being a living religious and cultural heritage of Assam, is of tremendous importance in conserving the religious and social heritage of Srimanta Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva. Naam Prasanga reflects their teachings of Neo-Vaishnavism as a path of devotion and prayer to the Almighty. Having its roots in the 15th century, Naam Prasanga was first introduced by Srimanta Sankardeva in the form of collective worship by hymn singing and devotional recitation devoted to God. Based on the Vaishnavite school of thought, Neo-Vaishnavism promotes one God, Lord Krishna, as the supreme deity. Naam Prasanga finds close affinity with the cults of *Kirtan* and *Bhajan*, in which people come together to sing and chant the glories of God in search of spiritual bliss and communion with God. Even though there are regional differences based on differences in social and cultural environments, the core of Naam Prasanga is consistent in Assam as the people cling to the time-tested philosophy of Srimanta Sankardeva.

Assamese society, which is steeped in tradition and culture, welcomes many spiritual and cultural practices, of which Naam Prasanga holds a central position. It is not merely a devotional practice but a vibrant cultural expression through which the deep messages of *Bhakti* (devotion) and *Stuti* (praise) are carried to one supreme being—Krishna. Belief in the *Nirakar Brahma* (formless divine) is a central teaching of Neo-Vaishnavism and has a deep impact on the very nature of Naam Prasanga, transforming it into a living and spiritually enriching tradition that continues to dominate the cultural life of Assam.

Keywords:

Naam Prasanga, Samhati, Neo Vaishnavism, Heritage, Tradition.

Introduction

Assam, a land of cultural richness and religious harmony, is one of the most vibrant parts of India where religion, art, and philosophy have always remained closely interwoven. *Naam Prasanga* is one among many living traditions of Assam which has a special place as a devotional activity and a socio-cultural institution. Deep-seated in the preachments of Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) and his prime disciple Shri Shri Madhavdeva (1489–1596), Naam Prasanga still upholds the spiritual hallmark and unity of devotion of the Assamese Vaishnavism. It is not a prayer ritual but a vibrant art of celebration that fuses music, rhythm, poetry, and philosophy into a unity of divine worship.

Its historical roots go back to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th–16th centuries. Sankardeva was a saint, reformer, playwright, and philosopher who endeavoured to build a religion of devotion—*Eka Sarana Naam Dharma*, based on single-minded submission to Lord Krishna. His work changed the religious landscape of Assam by discarding the caste hierarchies and ritualism of complexity, instead promoting an inclusive type of bhakti (devotion) through collective singing of the Lord's name (*Naam*). His student Madhavdeva went a step further to codify this devotional practice in his thoughtful works like the *Namghosha* and *Borgeets*, and thereby institutionalized the Naam Prasanga tradition within the *Namghar*, the community house of prayer that emerged as the center of Assamese social and religious life.

To contextualize Naam Prasanga as a cultural phenomenon, one needs to also position it within the overall milieu of Assamese culture. Culture, according to Edward B. Tylor's definition, is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Assamese culture in this regard represents a blending of indigenous tribal customs and Aryan religious concepts, eventually growing into a composite cultural identity characterized by tolerance, creativity, and spiritual richness. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva became a force for unification, remaking the Assamese cultural ethos in terms of equality, fraternity, and piety. Naam Prasanga is, therefore, a living legacy—a persistent expression of the religious and philosophical ideals of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Naam Prasanga links the sacred and the social, the aesthetic and the moral, safeguarding Assam's cultural energy for centuries of transformation. When one examines its religious and philosophical foundations, one finds not only the devotional core of Assamese society but also the abiding strength of faith as a power of cultural continuity.

Structure of Naam Prasanga in Namghars and Satras

Srimanta Sankardeva, the Assamese saint and reformer, propagated Naam Prasanga as a spiritual means to share cultural beliefs and customs and to promote total surrender to Lord Krishna. Although a type of Vaishnavism, the philosophy and practices of Naam Prasanga cross social boundaries like caste, race, or religion. In order to nurture such a concept of equality and united devotion, Sankardeva founded the Namghar—a public prayer hall—where individuals come together to read scriptures, manuscripts, and unite in singing hymns for the glory of God. These congregations of devotees, which are referred to as *Bhakats*, constitute the living incarnation of communal worship and religious oneness as dreamed of by Sankardeva.

Although first established by Srimanta Sankardeva, the practice of *Naam Prasanga* was subsequently developed and enriched by Shri Shri Madhavdeva and other Vaishnavite gurus. Following the death of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva succeeded as spiritual heir and further enriched the philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism in his own manner, following the basic ideals set forth by his guru.

Naam Prasanga is a community form of devotional singing—a musical form of *Bhakti* called *Hari Naam*. The whole performance is guided by a *Nam-Acharya* (prayer leader), who conducts the congregation through a set of devotional pieces like *Borgeet*, *Bhatima*, *Naam-Chanda* (taken from *Naam-Ghosha*), *Ghukha-Chanda* (taken from *Kirtan-Ghosha*), and *Bhagawat Path*. These holy recitations and songs are presented at the Lord's feet as offerings of devotion. Though the form of *Naam Prasanga* is generally consistent throughout Assam,

there are differences according to the *Samhatis* (sects) of Neo-Vaishnavism, who have established their own traditional modes of worship.

Of these sects, the *Nika Samhati*, founded by Sri Sri Badala Padma Ata, has a special mode of Naam *Prasanga* known as *Jugal Prasanga*, especially common in the Barpeta Satra and surrounding areas. The *Brahma Samhati Satras*, such as *Auniati Satra* and *Dakshinpat Satra*, follow slightly different rituals in offering Naam. Similarly, the *Purush Samhati Satras*—including *Bhugpur Satra*, *Begena Ati Satra*, and *Sipoha Satra*—adhere to their own form of Naam *Prasanga*, incorporating verses from the *No-Ghosha*, a sacred text composed by Shri Shri Purushottam Thakur, the grandson of Sankardeva and founder of this *Samhati*. The *No-Ghosha* is interpolated between the *Naam-Chanda* and *Ghosha-Chanda*. This practice has been followed in some other *Satras* over the course of time as well. All *Samhatis*, however, have one and the same fundamental ideal in common—worship of one supreme God, Lord Krishna.

The *Kala Samhati* (also *Kaljar Samhati*), established by Sri Sri Gopal Deva, demonstrates more variety in its practices of worship and well known for its egalitarians and humanitarian outlooks for which it spread among the tribes. Though adhering to the fundamental principles of Sankardeva philosophy, some *Satras* belonging to this sect indulge in what is called *Kewoliya Dharma*, a different form of worship. In this *Samhati*, the influence of Brahminical rituals has been reduced to a negligible position. Out of this tradition, another sect, Moamariya, came into being due to Sri Sri Aniruddha Deva, who was a disciple of Shri Shri Gopal Deva. The Moamariyas are different in their devotional practice since they adopt *Bhakti Mangal Ghosha* written by Aniruddha Deva in place of *Naam-Ghosha* where he paid homage to Sankardeva as God incarnate himself. The *Bhakti Mangal Ghosha* is based on the spirit of *Bhagawata Purana* and Madhabdeva's *Namghosha* ~~containing the essence of all the *Nigama Satra*'s~~. In addition, the *Kala Samhati* adheres to the *Kirtaniya* worship style, giving priority to *Kirtan* over *Prasanga*. However, certain *Satras* in this *Samhati* still practice Naam *Prasanga* even in modern times.

A philosophical study of the *Samhatis* in Neo-Vaishnavism further discovers that the thought system of Naam *Prasanga* is deeply spiritual and disciplined in nature. A Naam *Prasanga* leader is required to go through certain spiritual phases like *Xaraniya*, *Bhajaniya*, and *Charinam Bhakat* prior to conducting the ceremony. The ceremony involves age-old instruments including *Bor Taal* (cymbals), *Khol* (drum), and *Doba*, which are part of the devotional performance. The final aim of Naam *Prasanga* is to connect the soul with the *Paramatma* (Supreme Being). In classical Assamese Vaishnavite thought, this act is termed as "*Nirakar Brahmar Xoite Ekatma Hoi Krishna k Stuti Kora*"—rendering the soul, mind, and body to Lord Krishna for eternal peace.

The spiritual aura created by Naam *Prasanga*, referred to as *Naam Brahma*, is said to cleanse the soul and create harmony within. In philosophical terms, *Naam* has also been represented as *Naam Hingha* (Naam as a Lion), wherein the lion stands for the divine strength of *Naam*, the elephant stands for human faults (*paap*), and the turtle represents the Earth. *Naam* (the divine sound) therefore overcomes sin and restores cosmic balance. With its deep philosophical and spiritual aspects, Naam *Prasanga* remains ever an essential part of Assamese society and culture. It is a living tradition of Neo-Vaishnavism—keeping alive the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and fostering unity, devotion, and peace among all.

Findings

The research indicates that Naam-*Prasanga* remains a dynamic and very strong cultural as well as religious tradition in Assam, grounded in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement established by Srimanta Sankardeva. Its religious tradition is grounded in joint recitation of the name of Lord Krishna, which is a source of spiritual illumination, ethical cultivation, and social cohesion. Philosophically, Naam-*Prasanga* represents the values of *Bhakti* (devotion), equality, and solidarity between all members of society without regard to the caste, class, and ethnic differences.

Despite the influences of modernity and shifting social conditions, Naam-Prasanga has remained alive and vibrant, constituting a living heritage that maintains the moral, spiritual, and communal ideals of Assamese society. It is not just a religious ceremony but a rich philosophical tradition and social movement which continues to evoke a sense of shared identity, harmony, and piety among the people of Assam today.

In Srimanta Sankardeva's *Kirtan Ghosha*, the *Adhyaya* called "*Naradar Krishna Darshan*" is a philosophical treatise on God's existence and the holiness of the *Naam* (the Divine Name). The line, "*Narodoto Bishnu Asonto Koi / Boikunthot Moi Nathaku Roi / Jugiru Hiya Eri Homudai / Thaku Bhokotor Kirtan Sai*," so aptly summarizes this theme. Its translation signifies: "They say that Vishnu stays with Narada; I do not stay in *Vaikuntha*, nor in *yogis*' hearts. I stay wherever my devotees sing my name." This utterance of deep import, reminiscent of a divine conversation between Lord Vishnu and Sage Narada, signifies the spiritual superiority of *Kirtan*—the chanting of the Lord's name collectively. By this verse, Sankardeva depicts how God is beyond heavenly worlds and ascetic hearts and prefers to reside with the genuine piety of His devotees. Such an understanding not only emphasizes the redemptive power of *Naam* but also depicts Sankardeva's philosophical acuity and devotional insight. By putting forth this vision, he motivated the idea of *Eka Sharana Naam Dharma*, a religion based on devotion to a single God through the means of Naam Prasanga and *Kirtan*, thus bringing mankind together under one heavenly and divine spiritual path.

Conclusion

Right at the top of the heritage of Srimanta Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva, Naam Prasanga and its philosophical basis represent a deep search for religious reformation and social cohesion. It inspired men and women to embrace a more philosophical and enlightened way of worship, moving away from the various and oftentimes divisive rituals of devotion. The philosophy of *Nirakar Brahma*, the shapeless divine, was the beacon that guided the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which could bring individuals from all walks of society together under a single spiritual vision. Even royal benefactors joined in the so-called *Vaishnava Marga*, or Vaishnavite Way of Worship, which testifies to the broad social appeal and acceptance of the movement. As articulated in the *Naam Ghosha*, written by Shri Shri Madhavdeva, the value of Naam Prasanga comes not merely from its devotional content but also from its deep philosophical insight into the nature and holiness of the "*Naam*"—the divine name of the Divine.

‘ Shri Name Rati Mililo Jahar
Hitu Bhagyobonte Paile Xonkharor Paar .
Horiguno Bhokotoro Kornor Bhukhon
Jitu Xoda Lobe Nam Xi Xi Mohajon.
Nityanondomoy Ram Bhokotor Dhon
Hori Bine Aar Dhon Hobe Okaron.
Aan Dhormo Nahi Hori Namoko Ulam
Horiro Ballabha Jitu Xoda Bule Ram.
Krishna Nam Xodaiye Anonde Jitu Dhore
Bonkho Come Toroyo Horiku Boishyo Kore.
(Naam Ghosha : 549-553)

English translation of the Verse,

“He who finds love in the name of Sri Rama,
That fortunate one crosses the ocean of the world.
The virtues of Hari are the ornaments of the devotees’ ears,
He who always takes the name is a great person.

The name is the eternal wealth of the devotees,
All other wealth besides Hari is meaningless.
There is no religion in the world equal to the name of Hari,
He who always says Rama is the best of men.
There is no other religion comparable to the name of Hari,
He who always says Rama is dear to Hari.
He who always holds the name of Krishna with joy,
Crosses with his family and makes Hari obedient.
He who sings the praises of Hari with certainty,
Finds a friend in Hari, what fear is there of death?"

Therefore, the philosophical meaning of Naam Prasanga is in-depth realisation of life and the divine mission of life. It is not a mere devotional practice but an all-encompassing philosophy of life that leads people towards ethical training, spiritual consciousness, and self-realisation. The philosophies instilled in Naam Prasanga lay greater stress upon connotative comprehension of life—calling upon individuals to acknowledge their meaningful responsibility on the planet and to coexist peacefully with the divine order. Through the practice of group prayer and recitation of the Lord's name, people come to surrender mind and body to a single overarching deity and so acquire inner peace as well as spiritual illumination. Though regional differences and sectarian divisions might have resulted in varying modes of practice, the basic philosophy has never changed since its founding by Srimanta Sankardeva. The movement still maintains the ideals of equality, devotion, and the attainment of God through *Naam*—the divine name. Thus, Naam Prasanga is not just a symbol of religious faith but also a living tradition combining philosophy, culture, and spirituality, which still directs the moral and spiritual awareness of Assamese society even in contemporary times.

References

- Bayon, Bhabajeet. *Shri Shri Sankardev-Madhavdev Birochito Kirtan-Ghosha Aru Naam-Ghosha*. 4th ed., R.G. Publications, 2022.
- Bezbarua, Lakshminath. *Shri Shri Sankardeva Aru Shri Shri Madhavdeva*. Published by Sri Pradyut Hazarika on behalf of Banalata, 2017. ISBN: 978-81-73393-34-6.
- Bhuyan, Pranjal. "Sectarian Divisions of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam." *International Journal of Development and Scientific Research (IJDSR)*, vol. 7, no. 5, May 2022, ISSN: 2455-2631.
- Biswas, Nanda Gopal. "Bhakti Movements in Assam." *The Quest for Fundamental Development*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2024, pp. 7–16.
- Chutia, Bipin. *Katha Kirtan*. 2nd ed., Kiran Prakashan, 2009.
- Duttabarua, Harinarayan. *Guru Charita* (Srimanta Sankardeva Lila-Charit). By Ramacharan Thakur, 29th ed., Duttabarua Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 2024. ISBN: 81-7373-011-3.
- Gogoi, Lila, Dr. *Asomiya Lok-Sahityar Ruprekha*. Reprint ed., Banalata, 2021. ISBN: 81-7339-327-3.
- Goswami, Malini. *Sankardev Sandarbha*. 1st ed., Jyoti Prakashan, 2022. ISBN: 978-93-91931-09-4.
- Goswami, Tirthanath, Shri Shri. *Ghoshamrit*. Dhalar Satra Puthibharal, 2015.
- Madhavdeva, Mahapurush Shri Shri. *Naam Ghosha*. Bhattacharya Agency, n.d.