

## Feminist Ideology and the Ankiya Naats of Srimanta Sankardeva: A Selective Study

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**Abstract:** This paper is a humble attempt to highlight the early traits of feminism observed in the three selective plays (Naat) written by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva- Rukmini Harana, Patni Prasad, and Parijat Harana. The central focus of this paper will be to critically analyze the woman characters in these select plays so as to identify the progressive outlook and high esteem Sankardeva had for women. Though during Sankardeva's time, feminism as an ideology or movement were unknown to all, but from the reading of his plays we can see his attempts to give equal voice to the women characters of his Ankiya Naats. Being the harbinger of Vaishnavism, humanism and democracy; Sankardeva valued women a lot from the core of his heart. Living during a time of religious turmoil and instability, amidst superstitious notions regarding women, it needs an immense courage and good will for a man to talk about gender equality much before the advent of the ideas of feminism. It is needless to say that the medieval age was predominated by patriarchal, feudal, Brahminical, even misogynist views concerning women. Sankardeva rising above such derogative views pays proper respect to women as evident from the various women characters depicted in his Ankiya Naats. In this regard, an attempt has been made by the researcher to highlight Sankardeva's relentless effort to spread human values irrespective of gender and class.

**Key Words:** feminist, ankiya naat, gender equality, vaishnavism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) is, undoubtedly the greatest saint of Assam. We cannot think of the existence of present Assamese society, literature and culture excluding the contribution made by Sankardeva and his chief disciple Mahapurush Madhabdev. A versatile poet, musician, artist, playwright Sankardeva was a man of multifaceted genius. His contribution to Assamese society is so great that the very foundation of Assamese society, religion and culture survives on his literacy and cultural creations.

The medieval age in which Sankardeva lived was an adverse stage for Assamese people as ritualism; animism and occultism were gaining popularity among the masses. People practiced "Sakta dharma" a kind of religion where innocent animals were sacrificed in the name of 'bali', a superstition to satisfy various gods and goddesses. Assamese people were in a burdened state of mind unable to find the right path to knowledge and wisdom. In such a panic and hard situation Sankardeva through the means of his "Eksaran Naam Dharma" showed the illiterate masses the true path of knowledge.

The 'Eksarana Naam Dharma' preached by Sankardeva gives importance on worshipping only one god, Lord Krishna. According to him, there is no need to sacrifice animals in the name of religion instead we should try to worship only one God that is Lord Krishna. He offers the following logic to prove his point "As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by pouring water only at the root of the tree, as limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Krishna." (Barua 100)

Thus Sankardeva's 'Eksarana Naam Dharma' give emphasis on worshipping only one God

"Sankardeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to one, Basudeva Krishna, also as Vishnu, Narayan, Rama, Hari and therefore, his reed is known as Eksaraniya naam Dharma. He upheld the philosophy of service in all. He comprehended one God, Krishna, one service, the service of Krishna, the supreme Brahma." (Barua 92)

The door of Sankardeva's Eksarana Naam Dharma was opened to all irrespective of class, gender and religion. To preach this 'Naam Dharma' Sankardeva created some one act plays called 'Ankiya Naat'. The 'Ankiya Naats' written

by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva have proved to be the most effective way of accumulating a huge, illiterate, diverse, myriad audience. The Ankiya Naats written by Sankardeva are: *Kaliyadaman*, *Patni Prasad*, *keligopal*, *Rukmini harana*, *Parijat harana* and *Ram Vijoya*. These plays have certain common features like Ascertain of the supremacy of Vishnu/Krishna, presence and dominance of 'Sutradhara', use of 'Brajawali' language, use of musical instruments like 'Khol, Taal, Doba, Nagara etc.', abundance of lyrical songs which are confined in a specific 'Ragas and taal', 'Vatimas', Versified prose etc.. Using the character of 'Sutradhara', Sankardeva identifies himself as a great director of plays. 'Sutradhara' performs several functions like inaugurator, descriptor and as director. It is an easy way at that time to visualise the original truth of the 'naam dharma' for the mostly illiterate people of the society and return to the right thinking

## 2. Analysis:

Before making an analysis of the women character in the chosen plays it will be reasonable to define what feminist ideology means. According to Meriam- Webster dictionary, feminism means a belief in and advocacy of the patriarchal, economic and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organised activity on behalf of right and interest. (<https://www.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>)

Feminism thus advocates that women should be given equal importance and rights like men in all spheres of life. Early supporters of feminism include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill most importantly Simone the Beauvoir with her epoch making book *The Second Sex*(1949). In this book, she made the famous statement that "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir: 1), which emphasizes on the social construction of the term woman. However, leaving behind this later development, when we talk about feminist ideology, it refers how in the works of a particular individual, thoughts of feminism occurs. Sankardeva during the fifteen century could realize the importance of giving equal rights to woman, paying proper attention to their needs. He was indeed a protector of women right because he has very idealistic perspectives towards women's honour and dignity.

Among the six Ankiya Naats written by Sankardeva, the Naats under discussion in this paper are *Rukmini harana*, *Parijat Harana*, and *Patni Prasad*.

In all these plays Sankardeva's progressive outlook towards women is revealed. *Rukmini Harana* tells the story of the secret marriage of Lord Krishna with her beloved wife Rukmini. Rukmini is the daughter of Bhismaka, the King of Vidarbha and sister of Rukmabeer. Rukmini was in loved with Lord Krishna and choose to marry him. Her parents also gave their consent to this marriage but Rukmini's brother Rukmaveer was not ready to accept this marriage as he gave words to Sisupala , King of Shedi rajya for her sister.

Bhismaka could not even protest against Rukmaveer and ultimately agrees to his son's decision. In such a situation, Rukmini with her immense patience and presence of mind handle the whole situation in such a way that we cannot but express our appreciation towards her. Sankardeva elevates her character by giving voice to protest against the arrange marriage in a brilliant manner. It is needless to say that Rukmini was a combination of absolute beauty and grace on the one hand and conscious about her own rights on the other hand. She unlike the submissive daughter and wife during medieval age raised her voice against her unwanted marriage. Her hatred towards Sisupala is clearly visible through these lines:

"This Sisupala comes to marry me: my life has taken a bitter turn indeed! With what face has he come to marry me? As a fox would feed on the female of the lion, as a baby would snatch at the moon, as the frog from the corner would desire nectars would Sisupala desire me..." (Baruah 52)

With such a rage Rukmini frames a plan how to get marry with the person of her dream, the greatest of all being, Lord Krishna. She sends an appealing letter to Lord Krishna stating her desire and extreme love for Him through Vedanidhi, an old talkative Brahmin in order to rescue her from Sisupala.

Lord Krishna, on receiving the letter, immediately responds to it and he hurriedly comes to Kundila with Vedanidhi. Rukmini also made the overall arrangement of her secret marriage. In her letter she wrote every single detail to Lord Krishna. As planned before, on the eve of the wedding day, Krishna eloped with Rukmini on her way to the temple of Bhabani.

Thus the character of Rukmini is the embodiment of an ardent beloved, a woman having her own individual thoughts and choice and at the same time very much concerned about protecting her own rights.

*Patni Prada*, another Ankiya naat of Srimanta Sankardeva, depicts the conflict between the Brahmin wives and 'Gopabalak' (shepherd) and the proud Brahmins who are the believer of Saktism. The main focus of the play is the pristine and sincere devotion of the Brahmin wives towards Lord Krishna. There are instances in the play, where we come across references telling about the subjugation of the Brahmin wives by their husbands, sons and other male members of the community. As stated earlier, patriarchy dominates the lives of women that time. According to Sanjib Borkakoti:

The time of Srimanta Sankaradeva's advent was a horrible time. Women had no honour in those days. They were taken by the *Bhogî* (a man selected to be sacrificed before the deity) at any time. That situation arose from the lewd behaviours of the *Tântriks*. "Making the women object of enjoyment as well as worship in the name of *Sahajîyâ* path of the *Tântrik* cult gave rise to adultery." (Borkakoti, 2018)

From this quote we come to know about the plight of woman of that time. Sankaradeva by elevating women and giving them rights to perform religious works, redeem them from such degraded status.

In *Patni-prasada*, Sankaradeva tried to ensure the women a space of importance. Here he showed the eternal love and desire of the Brahman wives to spiritually unite with lord Krishna. There is no trace of adultery in their sincere devotion:

"Jahar kothat mon mojl ekanta  
Jaak dekhibako lagi utsuk nitanta."  
(Ankawali:41)

[We have devoted our mind to lord Krishna,  
We are curious to have a sight of him.]

The Brahmin wives did not obey their husband's instruction of staying at home. They were so excited to have a look of lord Krishna that, they are ready to give up their husband and home to worship lord Krishna. On seeing their extreme devotion Krishna was ready to solve all their problems arising out of patriarchal domination.

At last the Brahmin wives become triumphant and even their husbands have to acknowledge their sincere devotion to Lord Krishna:

"Naari samastara situ Krishnat bhakati dekhi  
Gorihonto taape apunak .  
Kinu mohapap koilu, streeto odhom bhailo  
Dhik dhik asuk ahmak." ( Ankawali: 45)

[Seeing the sincere devotion of our wives,  
we are ashamed of our deeds.  
We are feeling guilty.  
We have done some great sins  
and now become inferior to woman.]

With such progressive outlook Sankaradeva paid high tribute to the sincere devotion to not only the 'Brahmonis' but all Assamese women.

The third play under discussion is *Parijata Harana*. This play is centred on a trivial incident of offering a 'Parijat flower' to Krishna's first wife Rukmini and the jealousy and desire of Satyabhama to have the flower at her doorstep. This is also a women centric play and the whole plot revolves round the jealousy intricacy of women's mind and how Krishna and Indra honoured the will of her wives and ultimately killing the great demon Narakasura by Krishna. Through the quarrel of Sachi and Satyabhama Sankaradeva tried to give voice to women folk. They also can claim for their wish fulfilment. In the process of fulfilling their wish both Sachi and Satyabhama criticize each other's husband Indra and Krishna. By doing so, they become powerful enough not to be restricted by the rules of patriarchal domination. As for example, we can mention the following quote made by Sachi about Krishna.

"Oi Satyabhama, I know everything about your husband Madhaba (Krishna). He is the son of a milkman, every women in Gokula is being reduced by him. Even kunji and old maid servant at Kangsa, is also not spared by him".  
(*Parijata Harana*: 44)

Such assertiveness was a new thing for those days as women were supposed to be meek and gentle with little voice.

In *Patijat harana*, Sankaradeva has shown how women can be assertive and straight forward like man. Through the character of Satyabhama, wife of Krishna and Sachi, wife of Devraj Indra Sankaradeva want to raise the voice of woman during his period. He gives example of women being taken to the battle field breaking the roles formed by the males like women were not supposed to go the war sitting back on the Garurr Pakhi. Sankardev has tried to give equal position to men and women in his Ankiya Naats. The greatest honour to the women as mother was given by Lord Krishna emphasizing the role played by Basumoti (Earth as mother) and Aditi, mother of Devraj Indra.

### 3, CONCLUSION:

Sankardeva's writings have been for the last five centuries a source of delight, inspiration, consolation and wisdom to the Assamese people. From the discussion of the women characters in the selected Ankiya Naats, we have come to conclusion that Sankardeva was the protector of women's right in each step. He never made any derogatory remarks on women. As stated by Sanjib Borkakoti:

The time when Srimanta Sankaradeva started his reform activities, was a very adverse period in the history of Assam. He was faced with opposition at every step. The feminists of today do not have to face such inconveniences. So even the utterance of a single sentence in support of women's honour in those times can be considered to be equivalent to writing a serious research book as of today. We can judge the contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva to the feminist movement only if we proceed in such a comparative assessment. Srimanta Sankaradeva certainly deserves the status of a pioneer in the movement of feminism on that criterion.

So, being the harbinger of feminist ideology, protector of women rights, and honour Srimanta Sankardeva is undoubtedly the earliest greatest name in the field of Assamese literature and culture.

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