

Reflections on Sufism and Vaishnava Mysticism of Sankaradeva

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the convergence of mysticism and Sufism, focusing on Sankaradeva's perspectives as a 15th century Assamese saint and pragmatic idealist. Sankaradeva acknowledged the value of mystical intuitionism and considered Sufism a manifestation of mysticism. The paper explains mysticism's complex nature, defining it as a pursuit of spiritual knowledge through direct experience, and traces Sufism's origins to the Persian term 'suf,' symbolizing spiritual poverty and purity. Sufism emerged from Muhammad's (PBUH) mystical teachings, influenced by various philosophical traditions, and was shaped by social and cultural factors. At its core, Sufism emphasizes experiencing reality through love, distinguishing it from orthodox practices. In summary, this paper aims to understand Sankaradeva's views, investigate Sufism's historical context, and analyze its central tenets, highlighting its emphasis on love, devotion, and spiritual experience, and offering insights into its contemporary relevance.

Key words

Love, Mysticism, Sufism

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 21-02-26

Approved: 10-03-26

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Vaishnava Mysticism of
Sankaradeva*

RJPP Oct.25-Mar.26,

Vol. XXIV, No. 1,

Article No. 03

Pg. 032-038

Similarity Check - 0%

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/
journal-volume/rjpp-mar-
2026-vol-xxiv-no1--270](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpp-mar-2026-vol-xxiv-no1--270)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpp.2026.v24i01.003](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2026.v24i01.003)

Introduction:

Sankaradeva, a prominent figure of medieval Assam and a pragmatic idealist of the 15th century, acknowledged the value of mystical intuitionism from a practical perspective. He also viewed Sufism as a manifestation of mysticism. It is worth mentioning that the terms ‘mystic’ and ‘mysticism’ have elusive definitions in the history of thought. According to the dictionary, mysticism refers to “the doctrine or belief that knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination, differing from ordinary sense perception or rational thought.”¹ The term “Sufi” originates from the Persian word ‘*suf*’, meaning coarse wool, symbolizing poverty and purity. Subsequently, it came to encompass Muslim believers seeking a mystical union with God, making ‘Sufi’ synonymous with mystic and ‘Sufism’ equivalent to Islamic mysticism.

Now the question arises: how and why did Sufism arise? The emergence of Sufism can be attributed to several factors, including the mystical elements in Muhammad’s (PBUH) teachings, the influence of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, Pseudo-Dionysius’ mystical writings, and possibly Buddhism, which was prevalent in Turkestan and surrounding areas. Besides, the social upheaval in Arab lands following Muhammad’s (PBUH) death also drove some Muslims to seek solace in the inner life, contributing to Sufism’s development. Moreover, Sufism was shaped by Advaitism, Judaism, and Christianity, although it diverges from Advaitism’s notion of identity. While Sufism critiques Islam’s external rituals, it remains inherently Islamic, emphasizing love and devotion over mere obedience to God’s commands. It is important to note here that the movement’s early phase (c. 750-1050) focused on mystical meditations, laying the groundwork for its distinctive spiritual path. Sufism’s core lies in experiencing “Haqiqah”² or reality through love, setting it apart from orthodox practices.

Objectives: The paper aims to achieve the following key objectives:

- (i) To understand Sankaradeva’s perspective on mysticism and Sufism, highlighting his interpretation of Sufism as a mystical path.
- (ii) To investigate the historical context and factors that shaped Sufism’s emergence and growth.
- (iii) To analyse Sufism’s central tenets, focusing on its emphasis on love, devotion, and direct spiritual experience.

Methodology:

The study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating primary and secondary sources to investigate Sankaradeva’s views on mysticism and Sufism. A critical review of Sankaradeva’s writings, historical documents, and academic

research on Sufism's history and growth is undertaken. By merging descriptive and analytical techniques, the approach seeks to contextualize Sufism's evolution, clarify its central ideas, and accentuate its unique aspects, yielding a detailed understanding of Sufism's focus on love, devotion, and direct spiritual encounter.

Discussion and findings:

Before delving into the problem, it can be said that in India, Sufism's conceptual framework assimilated *Yogic-tantric* theories and principles in modified forms, evolving through interactions with local traditions. During the Muhammedan rule, Muslim kings and nobles patronized *yogins*, fostering cultural exchange. Dara Shikoh, Shahjahan's son, was influenced by *yogic* discipline and translated the Upanishads into Persian, drawing inspiration from them. In his 1655 treatise *Majma al-Bahrain*, Shikoh reconciled Brahmanism and Muhammedanism, highlighting the affinity between Hindu pantheism and Persian Sufism. Sufi texts reveal close ties between Sufis and *yogins*, while Al-Biruni's Arabic translation of the *Yoga Upanishad* and *Haud al-Hayat*, a translation of *Amrtakunda*, facilitated the blending of Sufism with Indian thought, introducing *yogico-tantric* practices and superstitions from Kamarupa (Guwahati) into Sufi traditions by the 13th century.

It is important to note here that mysticism manifests in diverse forms, with Vaishnavism and Sufism in Assam exemplifying devotional mysticism, characterized by a devotee's profound humility and surrender to the Divine. This spiritual path, as seen in medieval Assam, fosters a pragmatic approach to life, evident in the teachings of Sankaradeva (1449-1569 A.D.) and his followers, as well as in the mystical thoughts of Chand Khan, Dara Peer, Ajan Fakir, and others³, revealing a shared emphasis on practical spirituality that transcends sectarian boundaries and highlights the region's rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

If we look back, during Shahjahan's reign (1627-1659 A.D.), Dara Peer, a saint, arrived in Assam with his disciples and composed *Jari* songs depicting Muharram's tragic incident. It is worth noting that *Jari* and *Jikirs* are Assam's popular folk songs that eulogize Sufism's mystical teachings. The word *Jikir* originates from the Arabian root "*jikr*,"⁴ meaning repeated chanting of God's attributes with adoration. *Jikirs* reflect the socio-cultural heritage of Assam's Islamic people, conveying simplified religious teachings in Assamese. In her *Rethinking of Sankaradeva's Philosophy in 21st Century*, Nilima Sharma says, "*Jikirs* and *Jaris* are the vehicle of propagating Sufism. *Jaris* are very popular among both the Hindus and Mohammedans and some Hindus were also involved in the composition of *Jikirs*."⁵ Chand Khan, Sankaradeva's disciple, is considered the first *Jikir* composer, highlighting the shared cultural and spiritual traditions of the region.

The *Jikirs* have undoubtedly been shaped by Assam Vaishnavism, propagated by Sankaradeva and his esteemed disciple Madhavadeva, reflecting their spiritual legacy. They gained prominence in Assam's socio-cultural fabric during Hazarat Ajan Fakir's era, a revered *Jikir* composer who migrated from Baghdad and embraced local roots through marrying an Assamese girl. Ajan Fakir's compositions aimed to reconnect Muslims with Allah's omnipotence, incorporating Arabic scriptural phrases. *Jikirs* typically feature a *Ghosa-Padas* structure, echoing Sankaradeva's *Kirtana ghosa* in the *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* tradition, indicating a clear influence. The dance forms also draw inspiration from *Satriya* and *Ojapali* traditions, showcasing cultural synthesis. Notably, Muslims participated in Namghar prayers, like Athkhelia, exemplifying interfaith harmony and shared spiritual expression.

Chand Khan's core teachings emphasized God's unity and universality, as well as humanity's equality, extending to all living beings. He preached that true superiority lay in devotion to God, attracting Hindu followers in Bengal who abstained from meat and fish, while in Assam, his admirers continued worshipping their traditional deities. This cultural synthesis was evident in Sankaradeva's time, where Muslims were allowed to chant Vaishnava scriptures in the Sundardiya Satra.⁶ Chand Khan's *Jikirs* and other compositions were notable for their suggestive and deeper meanings, influencing and influenced by other Sufi poets like Kabir, with similarities in style and theme. Other notable *Jikir* composers included Manjur Deen and Idris Ali, whose works reflected Sufism's core principles and drew parallels with Hindu mythology, such as the Radha-Krishna love story. The Sufi text *Kanhavata*, attributed to Malik Muhammed Jayasi, portrayed Krishna as Vishnu, advocating *Bhoga bhakti* over *Anasakti yoga*, and drawing from various Puranas and scriptures, including Islamic texts, highlighting the blending of spiritual traditions.

Historically, Sufism's entry into Assam was marked by Dvijaram's *Mrgawati*, reflecting Sankaradeva's influence. Dr. M. Neog notes that Dvijaram's poetry "provides a sweet aroma"⁷ of blended Islamic and Hindu cultures, particularly Vaishnavism. This counters J. Spencer Trimingham's claim that "Sufism owes little to non-Muslim life and thought of eastern Christianity,"⁸ which doesn't hold true for Assam's Sufism.

Ajan Fakir's *Jikirs* reveal *Tantric* influences and a plea for an emotive, loving relationship with God, portrayed as a friend. His mysticism, rooted in the Quran, echoes Neo-Vaishnavism's ideals, inviting devotees to immerse themselves in Divine Love. God is an omnipresent reality, as reflected in the Quranic verses "Whenever ye turn there is a face of God. Adore, and draw thou nigh"⁹ and "He loveth them and they love Him."¹⁰ Ajan Fakir emphasizes worship driven by love

and fidelity, not fear of judgment. Mystic knowledge of God stems from ecstatic union, a divine experience where God is trusted as a friend. To attain this, one must progress through stages: guilt sense, abstinence from avarice and anger, and selflessness, akin to *maqamat*. Accordingly, unification with God, the sole reality, is possible only through divine grace, rendering mystic experience and supreme insight indistinguishable, with the universe being an expression of God's essence.

Sufism in Assam is rooted in a few key principles, as outlined below:

- (i) Love of God: Love of God means being devoted and reverent towards Him. It involves trying to connect with God and remembering Him through prayers and praise. *Jikirs* help people control their desires and follow a virtuous path by embracing love. Experiencing divine love elevates a person's spirit.
- (ii) Faith and fidelity: Having faith in God is the starting point for love, and love requires loyalty. These three - faith, love, and fidelity - go hand-in-hand. Thoughts can trap us, but faith sets us free. The knowledge that connects us to God is the real knowledge.
- (iii) Repentance: The Quran emphasizes self-purification through repentance, which involves three steps: feeling sorry for past wrongs, stopping the sinful actions, and deciding not to repeat them.
- (iv) Detachment: A Sufi submits to God's will by fostering detachment, curbing worldly cravings, and embracing divine benevolence. As God's presence infuses their soul, they acknowledge the impermanence of all things except God. The ultimate aim is oneness with God, rooted in monotheistic faith, with prophets held in higher esteem than saints. Sufis don't reject the world; instead, they cultivate detachment while living in it, eschewing extreme asceticism.
- (v) Unity of humanity: Ajan Fakir emphasizes that humans are one, beyond labels like Hindu or Muslim, saying, "Whether Hindus or Muslims, all are subordinate to one Allah. At the end, there remains Allah alone."¹¹ *Jikirs* sometimes equate God with Brahman, the universal consciousness of the Upanishads, a view supported by Sankaradeva.

It is notable that Sankaradeva acknowledges the universe's mystery, echoing Albert Einstein's sentiment that "the fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious."¹² For Sankaradeva, mystical experience, acquired through intuition, requires profound spiritual knowledge and devotion. He emphasizes that devotion to God is a lifelong journey intertwined with morality, distinct from fleeting ecstatic experiences. As Nilima Sharma notes, the ultimate teaching is to "Extend your love for the Divine so that it would embrace the whole humanity,"¹³ underscoring mysticism's connection to morality and universal love.

On the basis of the critical and retrospective examination of Sufism and Vaishnava mysticism in Assam, the following points have been observed:

1. Freedom is fundamentally experienced at a personal level.
2. The empirical self merges 'I' and 'me', forming a unity in our understanding. True self-knowledge comes from grasping the 'I's social dynamics, yet profound insight arises when ego fades, unveiling the divine.
3. Uniting with the Divine isn't the final goal; instead, it is about returning to the world as God's servant, embodying divine will and purpose.
4. In Sufism and Vaishnavism, Assam, inter-subjectivity grows through connections with others, requiring restraint and perspective-taking without losing one's identity. As opposed to a solitary focus, subjectivity involves engagement with the world. This contrasts with Professor Whitehead's view that "religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness,"¹⁴ rejecting reductive approaches.
5. It is observed that Assam's medieval mysticism is tied to ethnicity, using *dharma* to balance individual and societal needs. *Dharma* encourages taking responsibility for one's actions. As Toynbee says, "We cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it by ourselves,"¹⁵ highlighting the importance of personal accountability.
6. Sufi and Vaishnava mystics' works resonate universally, evoking a common emotional response grounded in their all-encompassing vision.

Conclusion:

In view of the above, Assam's spiritual landscape is a vibrant tapestry woven from Sufism and Vaishnavism, blending love, devotion, and universal connection. These mystical paths converge on personal experience, self-awareness, and service, emphasizing empathy and compassion over solitary pursuits. Unique devotional forms like *Jikirs* and *Jaris* reflect the region's cultural synthesis, blending Islamic and Hindu influences. Saints like Sankaradeva, Ajan Fakir, and Chand Khan preached love, faith, and unity, transcending boundaries. This heritage offers a profound lesson: true spirituality involves embracing shared humanity and recognizing the divine in every being.

Furthermore, Assam's mysticism narrates a profound story of love, compassion, and unity, where Sufism and Vaishnavism meet. This spiritual tradition is marked by empathy and connection, not isolation. Cultural exchange has shaped distinctive devotional forms, reflecting blended influences. Revered saints emphasize love, faith, and unity, showing true spirituality is about shared humanity and divine

presence in all. Thus, in a nutshell, the mystics' message hinges on transformation, radiance, and returning to the world with love and compassion being the essence of true spirituality.

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