

Creative Humanism in Sankaradeva's Thought

Dr Joysri Kalita

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Assamese

Agia College, Agia

Goalpara (Assam)

Email: kalitajoy1972@gmail.com

Abstract

Sankaradeva continues to shape Assamese culture as a profound and active influence. He appeared during a time of political fragmentation and social upheaval, and his perspective reflected 15th-century Indian intellectual trends by joining deep spiritual conviction with a focus on human well-being. His thought is notable for its depth, emotive strength, and emphasis on human dignity, blending spiritual awareness with practical engagement in ordinary life. Even without complex logical frameworks or dialectical argumentation, the enduring force of his humanism and creative vision remains significant. Creativity involves producing what is new and original. It cannot be separated from human freedom, ethical awareness, inventiveness, and imagination, and it expresses the innermost aspect of human life. Rather than being imitative or automatic, creativity persistently generates fresh truths and values. Though superior intellect and empirical knowledge by themselves do not create it, they are essential for judging its importance. Sankaradeva's vast body of literature confirms that imagination is a fundamental part of creativity. Sankaradeva's creative humanism arose to challenge polytheism, ritual excess, and social injustices that stemmed from corrupted religious practices. Sankaradeva used religion to pursue social change, rejecting superstition and outdated norms while advancing values aligned with social needs. The present paper attempts to explain and examine how Sankaradeva's creative humanism moves beyond traditional spiritual humanism by treating the transformation of society as vital to ethical and spiritual progress. This is where the relevance of the paper lies.

Key words: *Creative humanism, social reform, spiritual humanism*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 20.05.26

Approved: 11.06.26

Dr Joysri Kalita

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Sankaradeva's Thought*

Vol. XVII, No.1

Article No. 06,

Pg. 048-054

Similarity Check: 0%

Online available at

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/jgv-vol-xvii-no1-jan-june-2026>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2026.v17i01.006>

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of JGV.*

Introduction

It is not an overstatement to claim that Sankaradeva is a powerful and lasting force in Assamese cultural life. He appeared in an era marked by social unrest and political instability. Consistent with leading 15th century Indian intellectual traditions, his vision was deeply spiritual yet dedicated to improving the human condition. His philosophy stands out for its richness, suggestive quality, and profound concern for human dignity. It merges spiritual insight with a grounded, practical approach to daily existence. Though his writings are not defined by complex logical argument or dialectical rigor, the vitality of their humanism and inventive spirit continues to resonate.

But before examining creative humanism in Sankaradeva's thought, we should first clarify what creativity itself signifies. Creativity refers to the act of bringing forth something novel and original. It is closely tied to human freedom, ethical insight, inventiveness, and imagination. As a distinctly human capacity, it discloses our deepest inner reality. A creative mind envisions, anticipates, and produces fresh ideas and values. Creativity expresses its radiance through many forms and is neither derivative nor mechanical in nature. As an internal process, it consistently reveals new truths and values. While the highest levels of intellectual ability and empirical knowledge alone cannot generate creativity, those faculties are still necessary for recognizing its worth. Sankaradeva's wide-ranging literary output shows that imagination functions as an essential element of creativity.

Different theories of humanism exist globally. Sankaradeva's creative humanism emerged as a response to polytheism, pagan rituals, and entrenched social injustices that had developed through the misuse of religious practices. In *Rethinking of Sankaradeva's Philosophy in the 21st Century*, Nilima Sharma observes, "To establish creative humanism which was being inherent in his thought, Sankaradeva had to propagate his eka sarana nama dharma."¹ Even in the medieval era, Sankaradeva understood that in India, philosophical ideas reach ordinary people most effectively when framed through religion. This foresight was echoed later by thinkers like B. G. Tilak, Aurobindo, and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in the early 20th century. Radhakrishnan even noted that Indians often grasp political knowledge only when it comes through a religious lens.² For that reason, in the 15th century, Sankaradeva saw no viable path other than religion for spreading his creative humanism. He was convinced that religion could drive social transformation by rejecting prevailing superstitions and outdated value systems while introducing values that met society's needs. Sankaradeva's humanism therefore goes beyond a simple continuation of traditional spiritual humanism. His approach actively engages with reorganizing society as a prerequisite for humanity's ethical and spiritual growth.

Like Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, he acknowledged that human beings are inherently social. To remain relevant, his cultural philosophy requires restating in contemporary language that addresses the needs of the real, lived person — one who exists simultaneously as “a man-in-society and also man-in-the-world.”³ Human existence and creativity must be considered together, because the authentic person manifests through creative acts, and creativity itself should be understood as the true expression of human power.

Objectives: This paper pursues the following objectives:

- i. To investigate how Sankaradeva's philosophy of creative humanism centered on human dignity, individual freedom, and social transformation in fifteenth-century Assam.
- ii. To define creativity as an inherent human attribute and to show how imaginative vision and moral understanding function as core components of Sankaradeva's worldview.
- iii. To assess Sankaradeva's choice of religion as a vehicle for advancing his humanist ideals and to evaluate how this method confronted the social inequities prevalent during his era.

Methodology: This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive approach based on both primary and secondary literature on Sankaradeva to trace themes of human dignity, freedom, and social reform.

Discussion and findings

To understand Sankaradeva's idea of creative humanism, it is necessary to begin with his view of the human being as a complex, multidimensional reality that requires examination from multiple perspectives. He conceives the person as possessing two aspects: one external and one internal. In the external sense, the individual is situated within the world, progressively expanding sensory and intellectual awareness until attaining clear rational insight. In the internal sense, the person discloses the ontological foundation of all meaning and embodies freedom and the power to create. Therefore, a human being cannot be limited to outward existence alone or wrongly treated as entirely self-contained, and the inner aspect should not be relegated to some undefined, impersonal, or mystical realm. The external and internal together constitute the complete person, while inward reflection and contemplative vision reveal subjectivity. A key element of personhood in Sankaradeva's thought is “the capacity to comprehend intersubjectivity,”⁴ and he places special emphasis on the profound link that love establishes between people. Through love, individuals experience mutuality, and it is love that forms the ground

for interpersonal relationships. He also addresses human development, describing every person as a being oriented toward self-surpassing, possessing immense inherent possibilities that can be progressively realized toward wholeness. On this basis, creative humanism is grounded in the human power to transcend the self and in a deep regard for humanity. One can understand Sankaradeva's creative humanism through the following key features derived from his thought.

Key features of Creative Humanism

A careful study of Sankaradeva's thought reveals several characteristics of creative humanism, as discussed below:

- i. Etymologically, "creative humanism is of or about man and his self-exceeding power."⁵ Thus, any effort that affirms human agency, introduces originality, and engages with a person's social context may be regarded as creative humanism. It embodies a constructive ethos in reshaping ethical and aesthetic values to uplift both individual existence and communal life.
- ii. It holds a strong conviction in the vast latent capacities of human beings that, when cultivated through discipline, can be realized for personal fulfillment and for the welfare of society. According to Potter, "Humanism is the faith in the supreme value and self-perfectibility of human personality."⁶
- iii. The central aim of creative humanism is the service of humanity, giving it a universal scope. It cultivates selfless love that extends to all people, transcending distinctions of caste, color, and class. In the *Prahlad Charitra*, Sankaradeva observes that "by promoting love, even an outcaste redeems not only himself but also the whole human race."⁷
- iv. Another defining trait of creative humanism is self-transcendence, where moving beyond egocentrism becomes central. This detachment broadens a person's outlook until it encompasses all of humanity.
- v. Creative humanism is marked by faith, hope, and fidelity. In Sankaradeva's thought, these appear as faith in the nobility of human nature, hope for a more humane future, and fidelity as a foundation for advancing universal brotherhood.

It is worth noting that human creativity develops within culture, and culture cannot be understood apart from people, society, and their world. Sankaradeva emphasizes the deep links between everyday social and material life and the creativity found in imaginative and intellectual work. As a seeker of values, man actualizes them through creative action. "In fact, conscious human beings use their creative powers and resources mainly for the production of values."⁸ Furthermore, valuations

shift across centuries as human activities change. A person with creative ability finds fulfillment in sharing and extending service to others. Such a person embodies self-sacrifice to aid others and, in doing so, draws closer to the divine. The *Gita's* ideal of *Lokasangraha* gains prominence in Sankaradeva's thought. At times, his ideas also resonate with the teachings of the Buddha's "*Dhammapada*"⁹.

In his metaphysical outlook, Sankaradeva weaves together monotheism and monism. He decisively sets aside polytheism and upholds a monotheistic stance through his *eka sarana nama dharma*, a doctrine that researchers often compare to Ramanujacharya's concept of *savisesa* and *saguna Brahman*. Concurrently, his works include numerous statements endorsing monism or *Advaitavada* and affirming *Nirguna Brahman*, prompting scholars to note similarities with Sankaracharya's non-dual philosophy. Such seeming contradictions do not diminish the depth of Sankaradeva's philosophy, as his creative humanism is subtly sustained by pragmatic idealism. While some critics link his thought to the *Purusasukta* of the *Rgveda*, a deeper examination shows it was enlivened by the core teachings of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Bhagavadgita*, and the *Upanishads*. In Sankaradeva's system, Srikr̥ṣṇa or *Hari* stands for Absolute Reality and the highest good, which is attainable through altruistic action and by embracing humanity with universal love.

Another notable aspect of Sankaradeva's thought or philosophy is his commitment to a middle way, echoing the Buddha's *majjhima patipada*. He neither urged his followers toward ascetic renunciation or *sannyasa* nor encouraged surrender to sensual indulgence. He taught that people can attain self-realization and build social harmony while living fully in this world of time and space. By winning people over through dialogue, Sankaradeva welcomed Muslims and various tribal groups into his community, thus laying early foundations for national integration in medieval India. A further landmark effort was his use of the vernacular for educational outreach. To advance learning and culture, he created socio-religious centers like *Namghars* and *Satras* that nurtured painting, drama, devotional music, and dance. Even today, *Satras* and *Namghars* serve as the heart of Assam's socio-religious and cultural identity.

Furthermore, Sankaradeva's Creative Humanism includes a secular ethical outlook that begins with individual change and moves toward wider social reform. His ideas reflect a democratic ethos. To resonate with the general public, his privileges faith over reasoning and love over intellect, maintaining that faith surpasses logic in attaining life's supreme purpose. He describes human awareness as having three tiers. The initial tier is *jiva*, where consciousness is restricted to the physical body, sensory experience, and mental activity. The next tier is *Atman*, which extends beyond the limitations of *jiva*. The highest tier is *Paramatman*, reached through dedicated

spiritual discipline. *Paramatman* is known by names like *Isvara*, *Hari*, *Krsna*, and *Vishnu*. Fundamentally, *Paramatman* is identical with *Atman*, and *Atman* is identical with *jiva*. In turn, *jiva* is *Atman*, and *Atman* is *Paramatman* or *Brahman*. Hence, through creative endeavour, the *jiva* can actualize the nature of *Brahman*.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that Sankaradeva's Creative Humanism offers a complete outlook that places human effort, moral living, and compassion at its core. It is built on a belief in what people can become. For him, creativity is not limited to art. It is a force that can reshape values and culture to improve both personal life and society. He argues that people generate real value through purposeful, constructive actions that connect their inner awareness with the world around them. Thus, his message is for everyone because he ranks service to humanity above caste, class, or social status. He urges people to go beyond self-interest so that love and loyalty replace ego and conflict. Faith in human dignity, hope for a just society, and loyalty as the basis of universal kinship become guiding principles. Rather than withdrawing from daily life, he advocates a balanced path that avoids both severe asceticism and excess in pleasure. He teaches that spiritual growth and social peace should be pursued while living actively in the world.

In terms of belief, Sankaradeva unites devotion to one God with the idea that all reality is ultimately one. His *eka sarana nama dharma* affirms a single supreme deity, yet his works also describe a *formless Brahman* and non-dual understanding. To him, these are not conflicting but work together through a practical outlook that ties ultimate truth to compassionate action. Srikr̥ṣṇa or *Hari* represents the highest reality and highest good, realized through universal love and selfless work for the welfare of all, or *Lokasangraha*. His humanism was inclusive in practice. He taught in the common language to open up education, established *Namghars* and *Satras* as centers for learning and the arts, and brought Muslims and tribal communities into a shared spiritual and social life. This fostered early national integration and sustained Assam's traditions in painting, theatre, music, and dance. He also explains human consciousness in three stages: *jiva*, *Atman*, and *Paramatman*. Because *jiva* is in essence the same as *Paramatman* or *Brahman*, every person can awaken the divine within through creative effort and steady practice. Thus, his Creative Humanism is both practical and spiritual. It begins with transforming the individual through faith, love, and discipline, and then extends to transforming society. By linking deep philosophy with culture, reason with devotion, and personal well-being with the common good, it presents a humanism that is spiritual, community-oriented, and profoundly creative.

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