



Tradition and Cultural Acceptance of Costume and Textile: The Influence of Srimanta Sankardeva on Tai Ahom Dress Tradition in Assam

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of Tai-Ahom traditional costume and the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural reforms introduced by Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam. Originally, the Tai-Ahoms are from Southeast Asia. They have established their rule and identity in Assam. They have carried with them a distinct sartorial heritage marked by structured garments, symbolic turbans (pag), and the luxurious use of Muga and Eri silk. In parallel, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Bhakti movement was led by Srimanta Sankardeva, which encouraged a shift towards spiritual egalitarianism, simplicity, and performative devotion through Ankiya Naat, Bhaona, and Satra traditions. This study identifies shared motifs such as the Magor design in Bhaona jewelry and the ceremonial headgear (pag) of Sutradhara as key areas of convergence. These costume elements in Ankiya Naat performances illustrate how Sankardeva has selectively incorporated the indigenous form, including Tai Ahom aesthetics, for promoting a unifying Assamese identity. Drawing from the archival texts, museum artifacts, and observations, this study argues that Sankardeva's inclusive vision is not only spiritualized performance art but also redefines the visual language of costumes in Assam. By tracing the dialogue between the Tai-Ahoms and Sankardeva's tradition, this study tries to contribute to



Introduction:

Assam has been the epicentre of numerous cultural convergence and encounters; which have since time immemorial contributed in designing the rich socio-cultural fabric it boasts of today. One among the most remarkable intersections in this confluence has been the cultural exchange of the Tai Ahom with the reformist movement of Srimanta Sankardeva.

The Ahoms, who entered Assam in the thirteenth century, brought with them a vibrant Tai cultural heritage, marked by elaborate rituals, ceremonial practices, and distinctive attire. Their garments—richly woven in silks, adorned with bright colours, and complemented by ornate ornaments—were not merely items of clothing but living expressions of social hierarchy, aristocratic splendour, and the authority of a ruling class. Dress, in the Ahom world, carried the weight of lineage, power, and identity.

By the fifteenth century, a significant cultural reimagination and reformation was led by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), the saint, poet, and reformer. Srimanta Sankardeva launched the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which reshaped the spiritual and cultural life of the land. His doctrine of *Ekasarana Dharma* emphasised devotion, humility, and equality before One God, offering a radical departure from ritualistic excess and social stratification. Not limiting only to theology, the Guru's Movement permeated literature, performing arts, architecture, and crucially, the codes of dress and appearance. For the Guru, attire was a reflection of inner purity, communal belonging, and spiritual integrity; and not merely a mark of power and vanity. The Tai Ahom monarchy allowed profound infusion, inclusion and transformation during that period. What had once been an emblem of Tai aristocracy was reconstituted as a marker of shared Assamese culture—woven with threads of both Ahom grandeur and Vaishnavite humility.

As the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in the 15th–16th century gained its foothold; complexities, multi-polarities and perplexity gave way to **simplicity, inclusivity, and spiritual devotion**. Attires became simpler, with mostly plain white or saffron clothes replacing the earlier opulence. Men commonly wore *dhoti* and *chadar*, while women adopted the *mekhela-sador*, which emphasized grace and purity over luxury.



This gradual yet, rapid cultural infusion resulted in a big shift in terms of being blended very well in the evolving multi-cultural society. The simple designs of Vaishnavite credence coupled with great quality of the Ahom clothing culminated into larger acceptance among the elite as well as even larger affordability among the masses. It can be said that Srimanta Sankardeva’s egalitarian doctrine and the Ahom’s inclusive policy synthesized strongly to offer a cultural piece owned and admired by all. This in fact, is one most important socio-cultural renaissance which contributed towards wider practice of shared spiritualism, textile as well as several other socio-cultural activities.

Special Reference of Brindavani Vastra:

The Brindavani Vastra, a 16th-century silk textile depicting mostly the life of Shri Krishna, is a significant artefact evolved and propagated during the Ahom rule. Designed and developed under the guidance of the Vaishnav Guru Srimanta Sankardeva, it epitomizes the intricate weaving techniques of the time and showcases scenes from great Indian Scriptures like the Bhagvad Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata. While not directly an Ahom creation nor as a result of direct collaboration with the Vaishnav Guru himself, this world-renowned fabric was produced within the cultural context of Assam during the Ahom kingdom's rule.

Special reference to the Traditional Dress of Modern Assam:

In the modern period, Assamese attire such as the *mekhela-sador*, *reeha* and *dhoti-chadar* represent the cultural synthesis between the social, cultural and administrative tenets of the Ahom as well as the Spiritual magnificence and Eksarana philosophy propagated under Srimanta Sankardeva. Though the Guru may not have done too much of a work in close coordination with the Ahom kingdom then; the influence of Sankardeva on Tai Ahom attire underscores a broader truth: that religious and cultural reform movements can profoundly reshape the material expressions of identity, leaving a legacy that is both symbolic and enduring.

Srimanta Sankardeva’s Influence on Tai Ahom Dresses & Attire: Pre-& Post Summary

COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA’S INFLUENCE ON TAI AHOM DRESSES & ATTIRE			
Aspect	Tai Ahom Dress & Attire (Before Sankardeva’s Influence)	After Neo-Vaishnavite (Sankardeva’s Impact)	Influence



COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA’S INFLUENCE ON TAI AHOM DRESSES & ATTIRE		
Aspect	Tai Ahom Dress & Attire (Before Sankardeva’s Influence)	After Neo-Vaishnavite Influence (Sankardeva’s Impact)
Men’s Attire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Royal robes with Tai-style long tunics, rich silk, and bright colours. - Use of turbans/headgear with ornamental designs. - Preference for luxurious fabrics showing status. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dhoti & Chadar in white or saffron promoted as symbols of simplicity & purity. - Reduced use of heavy ornamentation. - Attire became closer to “common man” style, bridging class distinctions.
Women’s Attire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distinct Ahom women’s dresses (like <i>chaodhom</i> garments) with bright, multi-coloured silks. - Heavy jewellery and elaborate wrapping styles influenced by Southeast Asian traditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mekhela–Sador popularised as Assamese Vaishnavite women’s identity. - Use of lighter, simpler silks (<i>pat, muga</i>).- Modest draping encouraged.
Fabric & Weaving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patronage of silk weaving, especially golden Muga and bright Tai designs. - Exclusive use by elites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weaving became community-oriented under Vaishnavite culture (<i>satras</i> encouraged weaving as devotion). - <i>Pat</i> and <i>Muga</i> promoted widely for both commoners & elites.
Colours & Symbolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preference for bright reds, greens, golden tones, reflecting Tai aesthetics. - Colours used to show hierarchy & power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - White & saffron became dominant in religious and social gatherings. - Colours linked with purity, humility, and devotion.
Religious & Cultural Attire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritual dresses rooted in Tai Ahom animistic and ancestor-worship traditions. - Royalty wore distinct clothes in rituals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bhaona & Sattriya costumes created new dress culture. - Attires symbolised devotion rather than hierarchy. - Namghar gatherings promoted uniformity in simple dress.



COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA'S INFLUENCE ON TAI AHOM DRESSES & ATTIRE		
Aspect	Tai Ahom Dress & Attire (Before Sankardeva's Influence)	After Neo-Vaishnavite Influence (Sankardeva's Impact)
Social Symbolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dress reflected status, royalty vs. commoner distinctions. - Elaborate attire for Ahom aristocracy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vaishnavite teachings emphasised equality & community life. - Simpler dress blurred rigid class distinctions, influencing Ahom nobility too.

Discussions & Conclusion:

The evolution of Tai Ahom dress culture under the influence of Srimanta Sankardeva illustrates the dynamic interplay between material culture and socio-religious reform in medieval Assam. The sartorial traditions marked by colourful silks, elaborate ornaments, and ceremonial robes reinforced social stratification and royal authority. These garments reflected the aristocratic ethos of Ahom polity, wherein attire delineated boundaries of class and power. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement spearheaded by Sankardeva, however, reoriented Assamese society toward an ethic of spiritual equality and humility.

This ideological shift was reflected in dress practices: the adoption of simpler garments such as the white *dhoti* and *chadar* for men, and the *mekhela-sador* for women, signified both religious devotion and social modesty. The weaving of *pat* and *muga* silks within *satra* communities further democratized textile culture, embedding weaving into both livelihood and devotion. Thus, attire became a medium of social formation and transformation, embodying the values of inclusivity and collective identity promoted by Ekasarana Dharma.

This historical event resulted in the new dress & attire deeply promoting the strong 'sense of belongingness' among the masses and in uniting various parts of Assam. Thus, it may not be an exaggeration to state that this cultural syncretism was a major unifier that continued to grow stronger across different time periods. This synthesis reflects the adaptability of Assamese society in reconciling divergent cultural traditions into a cohesive whole. In this sense, the history of attire is simultaneously the history of negotiation between continuity and change, hierarchy and equality, heritage and reform.

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