



SANKARDEVA'S BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON ASSAMESE SOCIETY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This paper delves into the revolutionary impact of Srimanta Sankardeva's Bhakti movement on Assamese society in an analytical manner. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, Eka Sharana Naam Dharma, of Sankardeva, which appeared in the 15th century, being born of social inequality, caste rigidity and ritualistic orthodoxy, introduced a monotheistic, all-encompassing, and homogenized spiritual life based on devotion to Lord Krishna. The work considers the ways in which Sankardeva's teachings extended beyond religion to influence Assamese culture, language, literature, art, kinship and society. His oeuvre encompasses translation of sacred texts to Assamese, song and drama on devotional themes and creation of institutes such as Namghars (houses for congregational worship) and Satras (religious educational institutions), which have for centuries played a crucial role in sculpting the religious and cultural life in Assam. The paper also addresses social and political and social consequences of the movement in which and its function as the force of community consolidation and cultural nationalism. Thus, the study highlights the ongoing relevance of traditions of egalitarianism in shaping both the political dynamics of the time and the legacy of Sankardeva's ethos, which still inspire a moral vision through which to strive for the cause of social justice, cultural preservation and regional togetherness in modern Assam.

Keywords: Sankar deva, bhakti, movement, Assamese, society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti movement was one of the most influential religious and socio-cultural transformations in Indian history, spanning from the 7th to the 17th century. It emphasized

intense personal devotion to a single deity, transcending rigid ritualism, caste-based discrimination, and institutionalized priesthood [1]. This pan-Indian movement gave rise to numerous saints and reformers across different regions, each adapting the core principles of Bhakti to local languages, cultures, and spiritual contexts. In the northeastern state of Assam, the movement found its most prominent expression through the life and work of Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), whose contribution shaped the religious, cultural, and social fabric of Assamese identity [2].

Sankardeva was not only a spiritual leader but also a multifaceted cultural icon—a poet, playwright, musician, social reformer, and philosopher [3]. His religious philosophy, known as *Eka Sharana Nama Dharma* (the path of exclusive devotion and surrender to one supreme deity—Krishna), emphasized devotion (bhakti) over ritual, inclusivity over casteism, and community participation over individualistic piety [4]. He introduced communal prayer halls (*Namghars*) and monastic institutions (*Satras*) that functioned as centers of spiritual learning, cultural activity, and moral education. Through literary works, devotional music (*Borgeet*), and dramatic performances (*Ankiya Naat*, *Bhaona*), Sankardeva made religious ideas accessible to the common people in the vernacular Assamese language [5].

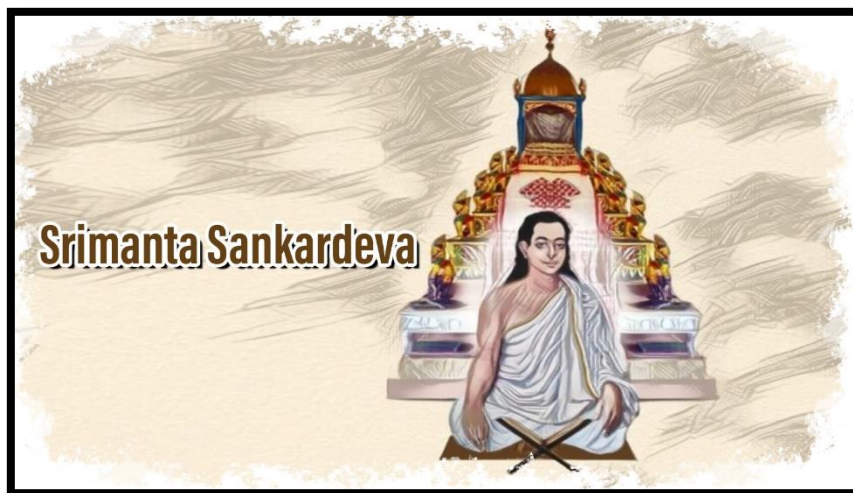


Figure 1:Sankardeva: The Social Scientist

It was a revolutionary movement. It not only denounced the hegemony of the orthodox Brahmanism, but it also tried to transcend the social and class barriers and bring into religious mainstream people belonging to lower classes and deeds [6]. Sankardeva’s ideals of social coherence and cultural synthesis provided the base on which a homogeneous Assamese society



could be constructed. His school of thought remains influential in maintaining spiritual and cultural values even today; his ashrams and artistic creations such as the sastragan survive [7].

1.1.Objectives of the Study

This analytical study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the theological and philosophical foundations of Srimanta Sankardeva's Bhakti movement within the broader context of Indian Bhakti traditions.
2. To examine the social reforms initiated by Sankardeva, particularly in challenging caste discrimination and promoting inclusivity.
3. To analyze the cultural contributions made by Sankardeva in the fields of literature, music, and performing arts in Assam.
4. To assess the role of institutional mechanisms like Namghars and Satras in shaping Assamese religious and communal life.
5. To evaluate the long-term impact of Sankardeva's movement on Assamese identity, values, and social cohesion.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Srimanta Sankardeva was born in the 15th century, when the Indian society as a whole and of Assam in particular suffered from social disintegration, religious intolerance moral degradation and economic exploitation. The religious establishment was mostly represented by the Brahmanical orthodoxy, which took care of religious authority, reserved to the priestly class, and of spiritual knowledge, confined mainly within the circle of Sanskrit-speaking elites. The masses, particularly the lower castes and the tribal communities, were disassociated with spiritual communion [8]. Caste-based discrimination that was rampant, ritual extravagances and icon worship further heightened social fissures and spiritual resentment on the part of the common folk.



Figure 2: Janmotsav of saint-scholar Srimanta Shankardeva,

It was under such a background of turmoil and death and strife that Srimanta Shankardeva articulated his Neo-Vaishnavite cult called Eka Sharana Nama Dharma based on and summarised as Nirodha Parinama Dharma, that is the philosophy of devotion, ethics and communal harmony. His movement aimed to heal society from the inside out—by providing a more accessible, inclusive, and ethical religion. Sankardeva proclaimed that genuine devotion (bhakti) was not a matter of caste, class or gender, but it was an open possibility for all who cherished a genuine relationship with God. Instead of complex ceremonies and ritualistic worship being directed by priests he encouraged direct access to God and devotion to Lord Krishna.

While Sankardeva’s message fit in the growing nationwide Bhakti movement, his philosophy, as a theology and practice, reflected his own regional idiosyncrasies that were truly Assamese in its character. A central teaching of Mahapurusha was Eka Sharana, stressing dedication to one deity (Krishna) and renouncing former gods and goddesses as multiple divinities are prescribed for householders in Hinduism. He asserted that spiritual freedom could only be achieved through exclusive devotion: to the exclusion of mediators, sacrifices, and deities [9].

Another of his central teachings was Naam Dharma, the act of repeating the name of God (Krishna) as the fundamental practice of worship. This new importance to vocal worship democratized religion by enabling everyone to be involved by singing, praying, and hearing,

no matter their place in society or ability to read. The habit also promoted a collective spiritual identity, in which devotion was communal and participatory.

To institutionalize his teachings and sustain it across communities, Sankaradeva founded Namghars (community prayer halls) and Satras (monastic and cultural institutions). These were to be the solid structures of his movement. Namghars were open community prayer and meeting places, while Satras were institutions of formal religious training, the arts, the culture, and the society. Not only did these institutions help in the dissemination of Sankaradeva's spiritual message, they fostered a communitarian existence based on moral values, mutual respect and cultural practice [10].

So Sankaradeva's Bhakti movement was not a mere theological response to religious orthodoxy—it was a total reform movement catering to spiritual, cultural and social aspirations of the people of Assam. His vision and institution building formed a solid ground for a new Assamese collective identity based on the values of devotion, equality, and cultural unity echoing even today.

Table 1: Review of Previous Studies on Sankaradeva's Bhakti Movement and Its Socio-Cultural Impact

Authors	Construct	Methods	Service Context	Key Findings
Mishra, D. K., & Tamuli, M. P. (2022)[11]	Sattriya culture as a tool for social development	Qualitative analysis of cultural practices in Satras	Vaishnavite monasteries (Satras) in Assam	Satras serve as institutions for cultural education, ethical training, and social integration; Sattriya culture contributes to moral and artistic development.
Das, S., & Chowdhury, P. D. (2023)[12]	Ethical principles of	Theoretical-ethical interpretation	Neo-Vaishnavite	Srimanta Sankaradeva's teachings emphasize equality, ethical living,

	Eka Sharana Dharma		spiritual context	and anti-ritualism; contemporary relevance seen in social justice discourse.
Nath, H. J. (2020) [13]	Historical evolution of Satras and Namghars	Historical- documentary analysis	Assamese religious and community institutions	Satras and Namghars functioned as tools of religious reform, literacy, and community leadership, influencing both cultural and political spheres.
Sankaradeva, S., & Ahmed, D. M. [14]	Doctrinal foundations of Sankardeva's Bhakti	Textual and philosophical analysis	Assamese Bhakti and cultural renaissance	Highlights theological uniqueness of Eka Sharana Naam Dharma; links between religious teachings and social reform through art and devotion.
Nath, J. (2020) [15]	Humanism in the life and literature of Sankardeva	Critical literary and philosophical study (PhD thesis)	Literary texts and spiritual narratives	Sankardeva's works are rooted in humanistic values— compassion, rationality, and social inclusiveness; literature used as a vehicle for ethical transformation.

3. RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Srimanta Sankardeva's doctrines were an utter rebuke to the contemporary spiritual orthodoxy and had an influence on the Indian social fabric. Thoroughly influenced by the Bhagavata Purana, his theology was also based on single godhead doctrine of monotheism wherein the deity was a personal godhead—Lord Krishna and that the devotee renders operator to a Singular Supreme God, Svayam Bhagavan. He thought that the real spirituality was in the heart's yearning, in good demeanor and in a sincere love and worship of Allah and not in any elaborate ceremonies or formalities or in the worship of Idols. In oppsition to the caste-exclusive religion of the Brahmanical tradition, Sankardeva preached a universal religion accessible to all people, regardless of caste, gender or social standing.

His work The Bhakti Ratnakar is one of his most significant contributions, which he translated and adapted to the Assamese dialect from a religious text in Sanskrit, specifically parts of the Bhagavata Purana. In the process, he popularized religious knowledge, rendering sacred texts accessible and relevant to the average person. His devotional texts, especially Kirtan Ghosa and Gunamala, did not just have theological depth, but were eventually incorporated in the routine spiritual lives of Assamese Vaishnavs.

Sankardeva also established a new genre of cultural and religious tradition called Sankari tradition that integrated religious ideals with literature and performing art forms of dramas, music forms and theater acts [16]. This synergy was crucial to the dissemination of devotional themes in popular, attractive physical formats. One of his primary contributions was the addition of Borgeet—devotional songs and hymns— to the corpus of ALI literature. These songs are still integral part of Namghars and Satras.



Figure 3:Resurgence of Devotion



To enhance the devotional aspect, Sankardeva also wrote Ankiya Naat, one-act plays of a religious nature in Brajvali as part of the Sattriya tradition, enacting scenes from Krishna's life. These were essentially dramas, enacted in scenes and songs, and were called Bhaonas. "Visions" reached and taught, inspired and amused listeners and readers with no small impact to the moral and theological lessons.

He also created classical Bhagavat literature in Assamese language that preceded his time and became one of the luminaries in the field, and pioneered a new form of Assamese devotional prose literature. His works were used not only as spiritual guide books but also as cultural symbols and guiding lights that had a profound influence on the minds of generations to come defining the religio-literary landscape of Assamese ages.

Religious and Philosophical Contributions of Sankardeva

- **Monistic Worship:** Preached Eka Sharana (Total surrender to Lord Krishna) as against polytheism and ceremonial worship.
- **Naam Dharma:** Advocated the recitation of god's name as the key for salvation, preferred personal devotion over worldly rituals.
- **Egalitarianism:** Fought against the age-old system of caste and made religious experience available to all castes.
- **Translation of Scripture:** Made Sanskrit scripture (e.g., Bhagavata) accessible for the masses by proving translated and adapted it into Assamese.
- **Advent of Borgeet:** Written devotional songs performed on classical lines, lent vibrancy to Assamese spirituality.
- **Origin of Ankiya Naat and Bhaona:** Created a new type of drama based on religious content.
- **Promotion of Assamese Language:** Elevated Assamese to a medium for religious, literary, and philosophical community.

4. SOCIAL IMPACT ON ASSAMESE SOCIETY

The Bhakti movement that was led by Srimanta Sankardeva brought about structural changes in the religion and society of the Assamese people. In an age of unwavering caste lineages, gender bias and restricted access to know-how, his liberal theology became a catalyst for a

progressive societal make-over that propelled moral parity, communal solidarity as well as cultural junction.



Figure 4: Assamese cultural renaissance

a. Eradication of Social Barriers

The destruction of the archaic caste-hierarchy was one of the most valuable social gifts of Sankardeva’s movement. His Neo-Vaishnavite teachings emphasising that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, irrespective of the caste, class or social status into which he or she is born [17]. This appealed to the unprivileged such as tribes, Shudras and other oppressed communities, who had been excluded from religious life. By incorporating them into the process of Eka Sharana Nama Dharma, Sankardeva broke many of the social barriers and afforded the underprivileged a spiritual will and stature. In this light, his teachings helped to shape a more equal society in Assamese culture, based on ideas of humanity, humbleness, collective consciousness.

b. Women’s Participation

Sankardeva’s era was one when society was deeply patriarchal, yet the saint’s movement stood out for its fostering of women’s active but restricted role in matters spiritual and cultural. Whereas orthodox Hindu religion limited the role of women in matters of faith, the Bhakti



movement provided limited access to them. Women joined prayers in Namghars, Naam-Kirtan and even occasionally such art forms as singing of Borgeet and performing in Bhaonas. Though women were by no means accorded equality in modern terms, to see women as spiritual beings capable of self-devotion was indeed a progressive posture in 15th century Assam. It made inroads over time into public attitudes on the role of women in the church and in society.

c. Educational Reform

Another significant social reform introduced by Śankaradeva pertained to education and moral life. By setting up Satras (monastic centres) and Namghars (community prayer houses), he founded timeserving mediums, which not only took care of religious activities, but also became the places of learning and moral training. These centres turned out to be places of imbibing scriptures, devotional music, drama and moral values – all in the Assamese vernacular making learning inclusive and community centred. It prioritized learning by doing, oral tradition and collective ritual over rote learning or the teachings of priests. The significance of this form of education was that it was not limited to any castes and communities and could contribute to creating a literate, culturally sensitive, and morally upright society.

Social Impacts of Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement

- **Eradication of Social Inequality:** Undermined caste hierarchies and welcomed marginalized communities into the spiritual mainstream.
- **Empowerment through Inclusion:** Promoted the idea that devotion, not birth, was the path to salvation.
- **Participation of Women:** Allowed limited but significant spiritual and cultural roles for women.
- **Grassroots Educational Reform:** Developed Namghars and Satras as centers for ethical, religious, and cultural education accessible to all.
- **Formation of a Cohesive Community:** Encouraged collective identity, mutual respect, and moral discipline among followers.

5. CULTURAL AND LITERARY INFLUENCE

Sankardeva's Bhakti movement permanently affected the cultural and religious life in Assam as well as inspired various literary works. Sankardeva was an innovative poet, dramatist, a



musician, a theologian, and a scholar and Sankardeva's influence on society and literature was not limited to religious life; the spiritual poet also molded the very soul of Assamese culture and language, making him the pioneer of Assamese literature and performing arts and a wide range of crafts. His works were instrumental in systematizing the language and thereby the literary heritage of Assamese, transforming it into an expansive medium for devotional portrayal, artistic articulation and moral instruction [18].

Sankardeva's literary talents are best exemplified by his writing in prose and poetry, which have simplified intricate religious doctrines for the common people. His principal books are the Kirtana-Ghosha (a compendium of devotional verses designed for communal chanting), the Gunamala (a compact summary in a mnemonic form of the Bhagavata Purana intended for personal meditation), and his Assamese recension and adaptation of the Bhagavata, which represented a popularisation of religious knowledge in the vernacular. These texts "spread the philosophy of Eka Sharana Naam Dharma" as well as standardised the grammar, vocabulary and the literary style, thus conferring a literary status previously not available to the language.

Outside literature Sankardeva's influence on music and drama was also formative and truly brought about a conjugation of art and religious devotion. Borgeet, He introduced borgeet, a type of devotional song whose words were richly spiritual and whose musical structure was based on classical principles, utilizing ragas. Srimanta Sankardeva and his foremost disciple Madhavdeva, through their hymns written in Brajavali spread the message of devotion among the ordinary masses of Assam, and Saints known as „Mahima“ who composed these hymns began to perform them in the religious congregations of Satras and Nam Gasti, which has been ever and integral part of Assam living tradition till today.

Among his most significant contributions is Ankiya Naat, one-act devotional plays. The playwrights wrote these plays to educate the public about morality and divine love, themes that were often allegorically illustrated on the stage. In Bhaona, an Assamese theatrical form pioneered by Sankardeva, the plays used dance, music, colorful costumes, and stylized acting. The tradition of Bhaona continues to enrich the cultural heritage of Assam and is performed on the occasion of religious festivals of Satras and in the Assamese villages, disseminating the Assamese values and aesthetics.



Sankardeva's cultural legacy lives on in generations of Assamese, not just as a religious reformer but as a social architect who redefined Assamese identity through his artistic and literary genius. Bhattacharya's synthesis of religion with culture turned Assamese society into a zone of common sentiment, enterprise and respect for language.

Cultural and Literary Contributions of Sankardeva

- **Literary Foundation:** Standardized the Assamese language through works like Kirtana-Ghosha, Gunamala, and Bhagavata translations.
- **Religious Literature:** Composed accessible devotional texts that are central to Assamese Vaishnavite practice.
- **Musical Innovation:** Introduced Borgeet, devotional songs that became a classical tradition in Assamese music.
- **Theatre and Performance:** Created Ankiya Naat and Bhaona, blending religious themes with artistic storytelling.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Established enduring institutions (like Bhaona) that continue to shape Assamese identity and aesthetics.

6. POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS

Although predominantly spiritual in character, the Srimanta Sankardeva's Bhakti movement also had strong social, political and institutional implications which overhauled the politico-socio-cultural lives of the people in Assam. His teachings and the institutions set up by him could be seen to have been instrumental in developing an inclusive Assamese identity which in turn helped in creating cohesiveness among the local populations, and served as a phase of cultural nationalism.

Sankardeva's focus on Assamese as a vehicle of religious articulation and cultural production was crucial in forging a common linguistic and cultural identity. In an environment characterized by ethnic diversity and social division, his syncretic religious ideas and his emphasis on local language and customs managed to knit together diverse communities within the fold of a common spiritual and cultural ethos. This unity would go on to provide the basis of what could be seen as a nascent form of Assamese nationalism, an identity that would not be ethnically or caste based, but would rather have its foundation on a shared value system, a language and rituals that emerge from the Bhakti ethos.



The Bhakti movement became popular even with local rulers and landed interests, who patronized Sankardeva's teachings and institutions. It was their approval that gave the movement its legitimacy and also paved the way for the establishment of Satras and Namghars all over the kingdom. Over several centuries, these houses of worship became one-stop facilities, serving as much as schools, galleries, engines of social reform, political negotiations. The Satras particularly, emerged as strong community organizations, which garnered public opinion, settled local issues, and regulated the rural societies.

Besides, through its emphasis on moral government, ethical behaviour, and social unity, the Satra system provided a concurrent civic order to the administrative structure of the indigenous rulers [19]. These institutions eventually assumed a quasi-political role, influencing public policy, mediating disputes among social agents and playing a role in governance at the local level. Such transformation of religious centers into institutions for community governance was arguably a characteristic without any second in the context of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam.

Literally and metaphorically, the political and institutional consequences of Sankardeva's Bhakti movement were not so much revolutionary as quietly transformative. It had united the people, stabilized the society and prepared the ground for a unique and distinct Assamese social political identity based on the age-old moral and cultural values.

Political and Institutional Effects of Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement

- **Cultural Nationalism:** Helped shape a unified Assamese identity through language, literature, and shared values.
- **Royal Patronage:** Gained support from kings and feudal lords, enhancing the movement's reach and legitimacy.
- **Institutional Expansion:** Satras and Namghars evolved into influential centers of religious, social, and political life.
- **Community Governance:** Satras mediated disputes, enforced moral codes, and fostered local unity and order.
- **Ethical Influence:** Promoted ideals of justice, compassion, and non-violence that influenced regional political ethos.



7. CONTINUITY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The spiritual, cultural and social heritage of Srimanta Sankardeva remains as one of the most alive factors in contemporary history of Assam. Not in obscurity Sankardeva, far from being an anachronism relegated to the annals of history, is as much a living force in the religious and cultural life of the Assamese people as he was during his lifetime, as the teachings and practices of the people reveal from generation to generation.

The Namghar is quite an old institution and the most abiding one to mirror this continuity. Namghars are present even today as seats of worship and learning as well as people's center of discussion in the rural Assam. They are not only spiritual places of gathering but local decision-making and cultural performance and inter-generational learning spaces. The daily observance of Naam-Kirtan and community prayer epitomize the tremendous influence of Sankardeva's teachings on popular spirituality and bonding [20].

His legacy forms the foundation of the Neo-Vaishnavism of the day, and in conjunction with the holy scripture in Assamese, the movement sought to purify Assamese people of their caste practices, other social ills and the caste prejudices, he also endeavoured to strengthen the Hinduism of his time when it was in a state of deterioration. The Three commandments of Eka Sharana Naam Dharma – equality, humility, and internal devotion are followed by millions to date. At a time of manifold social divides and identity politics, the Sankardeva model is one that can help hold together India's many communities.

In addition, the Sankaradeva movement thrives in the cultural realm. His contributions to music, drama, and literature have seen greater cultural integration, according to local schools' addition to curriculum, local festivals, and the development of cultural centers dedicated to his honor. Not just considered sacred activities, these practices are understood to be the embodiments of Assamese heritage as they keep the traditional folk culture alive even in the age of globalization. His works are being digitalized, documented and revived through the efforts of cultural institutions and universities so that they will be preserved for the future.

In modern Assam, reformers and intellectuals are inspired by Sankardeva to practice social freedom and spiritual pluralism. Discussions concerning social justice, communal harmony, and cultural revival are held based on his ideas. Educational reform, women's rights, and the



political promotion of marginalized communities in the modern world still draw on his teachings as ideological and moral touchstones.

Sankardeva's legacy is therefore anything but static—it has changed and adjusted and has remained a dynamic cultural and social force in the dealing with issues of the present and in the ongoing moral and spiritual formation of Assamese society.

Aspects of Continuity and Contemporary Relevance

- **Namghar Tradition:** Continued use of Namghars for worship, education, and social dialogue.
- **Religious Identity:** Ongoing influence on Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism and collective spiritual life.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Sustained practice and promotion of Borgeet, Bhaona, and other artistic traditions.
- **Social Reform Inspiration:** Source of guidance for modern movements promoting social justice and equality.
- **Cultural Revival Efforts:** Digitization and promotion of his works through academic and cultural platforms.

8. CONCLUSION

Srimanta Sankardeva's religious movement of Bhakti continues to be a fundamental milestone in the socio-cultural and spiritual history of Assam, presenting an ideal of integral change harmonising the spiritual, religious, aesthetic and social aspects of life. Recommending a monistic method stressing devotion to Krishna, Sankardeva questioned age-old caste heterarchies, ritualistic orthodoxy, and social marginalization, encouraging the virtues of antebellum imparity, humbleness, and communal integration. His literary and artistic contributions not only beautified the Assamese literary trail but also not everything were institutionalized by the creation of Namghars and Satras, that, even today, are bustling with activities related to faith and community life. His teachings continue to influence revivalist and reformist movements even in the present, and his memory is still alive in the contemporary consciousness of Assam, so that his relevance isn't just historical. The life and work of Sankardeva teaches us that spiritual awakening wedded to cultural creativity and intellectual vision can redefine a society's identity and purpose for centuries to come.

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Author's Declaration

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