

# **Srimanta Sankaradeva as a Feminist**

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*See also on [atributetosankaradeva.org](http://atributetosankaradeva.org): -*

- [\*The Wrath of Sita :Sankaradeva's Uttarakanda\*](#)
- [\*Sankaradeva's Contribution Towards Uplift of Women\*](#)

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It is generally assumed that the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) introduced the concept of feminism in 1689 AD. Locke opposed patriarchal rule and the God-given right of kings. But his theories did not extend to the sphere of home. He believed that women were naturally and voluntarily subservient to their respective fathers and husbands. In later period, different authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Simone-De-Beauvoir, John Survey etc. took up this subject in their writings. 'Le deuxième sexe' (1949) by Simone-De-Beauvoir gave a definite shape to the modern feminist theory. Betty Friedan's book 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) was another milestone. It challenged the prevalent notion that women could find fulfillment of their lives only as wives and mothers. The Indians also applied the concept of feminism in the political arena by raising the issue of women's rights.

But many people do not know that **Srimanta Sankaradeva** had introduced the concept of feminism way back in the fifteenth century itself, before the advent of all the above-mentioned proponents of feminism. Srimanta Sankaradeva was not merely a religious preacher. Unlike other religious preachers of the world, Srimanta Sankaradeva was a full-scale litterateur as well as a social reformer. Some people seek to compare his feminism with the feminism of today. As a result, they get confused and they surmise that Srimanta Sankaradeva was not a feminist at all. Moreover those people, who equate

feminism with sexual liberation, cannot grasp the subtle feminist concept of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

The time of Srimanta Sankaradeva's advent was a horrible time. Women had no honor in those days. A woman could be taken by the *Bhogi* (a man selected for sacrifice before the deity) at any time. That situation arose from the Tantriks. Making woman the object of enjoyment in the name of the Sahajiya path of the Tantrik cult gave rise to adultery among some people. Srimanta Sankaradeva redeemed woman from that degraded state and elevated her to equal status with man in the performance of the religion of devotion.

Women had the right to arrange offerings in the Kirtan-ghar, perform Nama-kirtana etc. in the *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* preached by him, which was not possible in other branches of Sanatana religion. Srimanta Sankaradeva initiated many women in his *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. He advised the married couples to offer Bhakti to God together. So women played a crucial role in the propagation of the *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. **Kalindi**, the second wife of Srimanta Sankaradeva initiated devotees after the passing away of the Saint. Such a thing was not possible in any other religious order in those days.

There are many evidences that Srimanta Sankaradeva accorded honor to women. The instance of making a woman named **Radhika** alias Yogamaya the leader of the volunteer-force at Tembuwani for construction of the dam is an important example of this. It was because of that tradition of giving high status and importance to women, initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva, that the emergence of women organizers like **Kanaklata** or litterateurs like **Padmapriya** became possible in the history of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. Contrary to that, even the so-called communists of India did not include a single woman in their politburo till the twenty-first century. So Srimanta Sankaradeva was more progressive than the so-called progressive intellectuals of the modern era.

That Srimanta Sankaradeva was progressive in his thought is known from his writings. A revolt against the traditionalists was brewing in his maiden book '*Harishchandra Upakhyana*' itself. The people who torture women are strongly condemned here.

**Streeka durbala kare konano niskhale  
Jvalanta bahnika bândhe bastrara ânehale  
(Harishchandra Upâkhyâna / 75)**

Srimanta Sankaradeva recognized the strength of woman by comparing her with burning fire in this verse. Even more important than that is the seeking of apology by men from women in his writings.

**Keli koutuhale âsilihi mora pâsha  
Krîrâta karilo toka jibâ parihâsa  
Yena bhaila rangara samaya mana rosha  
Ehi tota sâdho tâta nadharibi dosha  
(Harishchandra Upâkhyâna / 438)**

This description by Srimanta Sankaradeva of king Harishchandra seeking apology from his wife Saibya is recognition of the rights of women as well as of the self-respect of women. These are the harbinger of feminist thoughts. There is also proof in this book that Srimanta Sankaradeva considered women as partners of men in intellectual pursuits.

**Karmara samayata toka mantri buli lekhi  
Rangara belâta yena toi prânasakhi  
(Harishchandra Upâkhyâna / 436)**

This bestowal of the status of advisor on Saibya by king Harishchandra implies equal rights for women. Srimanta Sankaradeva would not have incorporated such comments or descriptions in '*Harishchandra Upâkhyâna*' had he not subscribed to that ideology himself.

Women are considered as subservient to men in the Indian society. The wife must do what her husband does; she has no right to behave otherwise. But Srimanta Sankaradeva showed in his personal life that he recognized the independent thought of

women. Though he preached a religion named *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, he never forced his wife Kalindi to accept the religion. He initiated her in *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* only when she wanted to get initiated of her own accord.

The way Srimanta Sankaradeva depicted the character of **Sita** in his Assamese rendering of *Uttarakanda Ramayana* is also proof of his support to the concept of women's rights. *The reaction of Sita in the description of Rama banishing her is different from the depiction of her meekness in the original Ramayana.* Sita accepts the order of banishment humbly in the original Ramayana. But the Sita of Srimanta Sankaradeva's Uttarakanda Ramayana makes derisive comments at Rama.

**Awe Râma swâmi sukhe bhunjantoka raja  
Mari jâo moi nimâkhiti banamâja  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 23)**

This derisive comment by Sita means that she did not accept her banishment and she derided the capacity of Rama to banish her. *This expression is an original creation of Srimanta Sankaradeva.* Even when Rama sent Hanumana, Bibhishana and others to the Ashrama of Valmiki for bringing Sita back, Sita spoke with vengeance. She said that there would not be a greater shameless woman on earth than her if again she spoke of herself as Rama's wife.

**Bolâibo gharani âro Râghavara ghare  
Nâi teve nâri nilâjini mota pare  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 299)**

Sita also said that she would have given up her life in Lanka itself had she known Rama to be so cruel.

**Moi jeve jâno Râma enuwâ nirdaya  
Lankâte tejilo hante prânaka nischaya  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 303)**

The incident of Sita entering earth after again facing trial in the court of Rama on her

return to Ayodhya is there both in the original Râmâyana as well as Srimanta Sankaradeva's rendering of the Râmâyana. But whereas Sita takes leave of Rama after expressing love for him in the original Râmâyana, she takes leave of Rama *ventilating her anger against him* in Srimanta Sankaradeva's rendering.

**Duste dila apajasha tâte âna trâsa  
Sale niyâ diyâilanta âmâka nirbâsa  
Dekhâ dekhâ ito kene swâmira maryâda  
Kisaka karile etamâna salabâda  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 365)**

**Râghavaka sâi kope katâkshe nirikhi  
Bolanta erilâ moka tumi kibâ dekhi  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 371)**

Sita even declared that she did not wish to hear the name of Rama again.

**Aura jena nushuno Râmara ito nâu  
Phat diyâ Basumati pâtâle lukâu  
(Uttarâkânda Râmâyana / 381)**

Srimanta Sankaradeva departed from the scriptures of Sanatana religion by depicting the character of Sita in a protesting style. *Thus he created a progressive trend on his own.* We can say that the concept of feminism was embedded in this trend initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva.

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 inconvenience. So, even the utterance of a single word in support of women's honor in those days was equivalent to writing a book on the topic in current times. We can judge the contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva to the feminist movement only if we proceed with such a comparative assessment. Srimanta Sankaradeva certainly deserves the status of a pioneer in the movement of feminism on that criterion.

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