

Article

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**Tradition of Biographical Films on Sankardeva:  
A study with Special Reference to the First Animated Assamese film  
*Sarvagunakar Sankardeva***



Looking at the history of Assamese films, several questions naturally arise – why are there so few films based on the life of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva, who was a 15th–16th-century Assamese polymath, a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, dancer, actor, musician, artist social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of the Bhakti movement in Assam? Why have we taken 75 years to make the first feature film on Sankardeva? Many would say that biographical films are usually expensive. It takes a lot of money to present the past in films, and the commercial value of biographical films is meagre. It is also worth mentioning that biographical films require in-depth research. This is probably why the cinematization of Sankardeva's Mahajivan was delayed. However, other marginal filmmakers in India had similar

limitations. However, they overcame these limitations as much as they could and made films based on the lives of great men. The 1983 film '*Adi Shankaracharya*' is one of the most famous films in the world. The lives of Shankaracharya, Tukaram, Ramadasu, etc., took precedence over Sankardeva in the Indian film industry. K.S. Raghavendra Rao's '*Sri Ramadasu*' and Chandrakant Kulkarni's '*Tukaram*' are notable additions to the tradition of Indian biographical films.

The genre of biographical films became especially popular in the 1930s. Since the Silent Film era, films have been made based on the lives of individuals. There are many films based on the lives of saints and great men in the world of cinema. French filmmaker Georges Melies's "*Jeanne D'Arc*" (1899), Cecil B. Demille's "*Joan the Woman*"

(1916), and D.W. Griffith's "*Judith of Bethulia*" (1914) are notable early films based on the life of a great man. Several films have been made based on the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Jesus Christ, Queen Victoria, Napoleon Bonaparte, Martin Luther, etc. Notably, most films have been made about the life of Napoleon Bonaparte in the Western film industry. Abel Gance's Six-hour long '*Napoleon*' (1927), D.W. Griffith's '*Abraham Lincoln*' (1930), John Ford's '*Young Mr Lincoln*' (1939), and Steven Spielberg's '*Lincoln*' are the most thought-provoking films in the Western biographical genre.

It is worth mentioning that a biographical film named '*One Track Heart-The Story of Krishna Das*' is based on the life of the famous Indian kirtan singer Krishna Das. J. Friedel produced this English film. However, we have not been able to successfully present the contributions of Sankardeva in an influential medium like film in our mother tongue, Assamese, not in English. It is relevant that we think deeply about this aspect. Among many other works, the ideals, personalities, and works of Sankardeva can always be kept relevant and introduced to the world through influential media films. Once, a famous critic said that films can be a fine introduction to a saint. Sometimes, the movie versions are as good as any biography in conveying the Saint's special charisma.

Surya Hazarika made the first feature film on Sankardeva. The name of the film was '*Srimanta Sankardeva*' (2010). The people of Assam should be grateful to Surya Hazarika for making this film, as he filled a long-standing need by making a film about the extensive life and various works of Srimanta Sankardeva. This film has helped in promoting the great ideals of the Mahapurusha. The film was released on 2 April 2010 in eighteen theatres in Assam. The filmmaker does not include the miraculous events of Sankardeva in the film. One critic aptly said of the film: "It is a challenge to make a film about the life of a great man whose life every day, every moment is a significant aspect of Assam's literary and cultural history. However, Director Hazarika has taken on this challenge and succeeded to a large extent. The highlight of the film is its set. The sets built to capture 15th-century scenes on

celluloid are very beautiful and reliable. We have not seen Assam in the 15th century, nor have we seen the picture of the village at that time. However, the image of the green village in our imagination has been immaculately painted on celluloid by this film.

The short film *Sathi Radhika* presents Sankardev's extraordinary life. It was directed by Anjali Das and stars Nipon Goswami as Sankardeva. Dr Bhupen Hazarika was the film's music director.

In addition, in 2012, a film based on the life of Sankardev was screened at the "Srimanta Sankardev Movement, Delhi initiative, 2012" organised by the Assam Association of Delhi under the direction of Sanjeev Sabhapandit. The film was also sent abroad for exhibition. In an interview after making the film, director Sabhapandit said: "I did not want to focus on the clichéd aspects surrounding him. He was a visionary, innovator, philosopher, social reformer and unifier, litterateur, and above all, an extraordinary human being. We are planning to distribute the feature among foreign embassies so that the rest of the world can learn about him and his teachings." Like Sanjeev Sahapandit, Bhaskarjyoti Mohanta, Sanjeev Barkakati, Arnab Jan Deka and others have emphasised presenting the great life of Sankardeva on celluloid. Arnab Jan Deka's film on the life and works of Sankardeva was screened in America in the year 1997. The screening of this film was a great initiative by the Assam Society of America. It is worth mentioning that Surya Hazarika presents Sankardeva not only on the silver screen but also on the small screen. The TV serial '*Dhannya Nar Tanu Bhal*' directed by Surya Hazarika, was based on the life of Sankardeva. The series comprised eight episodes, and this serial was telecast in 2004. The language of the serial was Hindi.

The happiest thing is that Manju Borah released the animated film "*Sarvagunakar Shankaradeva*" on November 11, 2016. The filmmaker also portrays some of the miracles of Sankardeva along with his works. Manju Bora's '*Sarvagunakar Shankardev*' is the first animated film in Assam. Animation films are gaining importance across India. In this context, Dharmendra Kumar and Aman Bhat, in their research paper "Game Changing Role of Animation and VFX in Indian Cinema", said:

“The Indian Animation industry registered a growth of 8% in 2016, with a total revenue of Rs. 15 billion. The Indian animation industry touched a new height in 2016. In 2016, the animation industry in India was mostly dominated by television, with a 56 % share; films contributed 32 %; and advertising contributed 11% and 1%. By 2021, the animated film share is expected to reach 34 %. The growth and success of animated movies based on local heroes and stories had raised the growth of 8.7% in animation Intellectual Property (IP) Production in 2016”. (p.109)

As estimated in this paper, the animation film genre has been expanding in India in recent times. Manju Borah brought a new trend to the film industry in the entire Northeast with the animated film '*Sarvagunakar Sankardeva*' and encouraged the production of animated films based on the stories of local people of the Northeast.

The cinematic language of the film is praiseworthy. This film begins with a sequence of darkness, and then the next sequence shows the darkness disappearing and a flower blooming. These two sequences indicate that Mahapurusha Sankardeva was born to spread fragrance as a flower in the society, which was chaotic and full of darkness. Some new things have been added to the characterisation of Sankardeva. These new additions give a special dimension to the character of Sankardeva. For example, in some of the 'Charit Puthis', Sankardeva caught a porpoise in the river in his childhood. But there is no mention of Sankardeva releasing it back into the river. The director, Manju Borah, adds this sequence and presents Sankardeva's love and commitment to nature.

Sankardeva: No, No..... We ought to release it in the river without hurting it.

The language of this film is glorified with the application of dialogue. Many things are often expressed through the projection of unfinished dialogue. For example, an excerpt from a conversation between Sankardeva and a friend is given below:

Sankardeva: Why such expression on your faces?

Friend: We thought...

Sankardeva: Look at this porpoise

The friend's unfinished dialogue in the conversation reveals a lot without saying anything.

It is noteworthy that Manju Borah properly uses the universal symbol in this film. For instance, we may say that the death of Suryavati is symbolised by the extinguishing of the burning candlestick. We know that Sankardeva visited pilgrimage sites twice. He travelled on pilgrimages on foot, by boat, by cart, etc. Manju Borah symbolically shows that he suffered greatly during these trips. A sequence shows Sankardeva soaking his tired feet in seawater. This sequence illustrates the physical suffering of the people during the pilgrimage due to the difficulties of transportation. In a sequence, we see that some blooming flowers have been laid down. Through this sequence, the director shows how sad the news of Sankardeva's death was! In this way, various universal symbols have been used in this film.

There are a few flaws in this film. We notice that lots of literary texts and songs of Sankardeva have been used in the film. But there are no subtitles of Sankardeva's original texts. The sequence of Sankardeva's death shows tears coming from Madhavadevas eyes. However, the film does not show the facial expressions and tears of the other characters waiting next to him.

However, we can say that Manju Borah's "*Sarvagunakar Shankardeva*" is a successful animation film. We need to make more films based on the life of Sankardeva as we know biographical films always enlighten us and introduce us to the glory of the past. Therefore, a famous film connoisseur aptly said about the importance of biographical films that regular fiction or fantasy movies allow us to escape our reality. Biopics allow us to face our pasts. They allow us to celebrate and rediscover each other as human beings.