

# Dharma and Expenditure: A Sankardevian Perspective on Household Consumption in Contemporary Assam

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## 1. Introduction

Household consumption is often studied through the lenses of income, production, and markets. Yet within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), economic behavior is not an isolated activity but a moral and cultural act embedded in the pursuit of *dharma*. In medieval Assam, Srimanta Sankardev (1449–1568), the great saint-reformer and architect of the *Ekasarana Dharma*, developed a socio-religious framework that reshaped household expenditure, social relations, and community life.

Through his institutions (*satra*, *namghar*, *bhaona*, *prasāda*), Sankardev cultivated a culture of simplicity, egalitarianism, and collective responsibility. His philosophy challenged ritualistic expenditure associated with caste hierarchies and emphasized instead the use of household resources for spiritual growth and communal welfare.

In contemporary Assam, where globalization and consumerism shape new spending patterns, Sankardev's philosophy presents a vital reference point for rethinking the ethics of consumption. This paper investigates the intersections of *dharma* and expenditure through a Sankardevian lens and situates its insights within modern debates on sustainable consumption and cultural ethics.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Modern Assamese households face the tension between consumerist aspirations and traditional cultural-ethical values. Expenditure increasingly reflects market-driven desires for material goods, status symbols, and conspicuous consumption. This often comes at the cost of community-oriented practices and sustainable living.

While Sankardev's teachings continue to influence Assamese society, their role in guiding contemporary household expenditure is underexplored. The central problem addressed in this study is: How can Sankardev's philosophy provide an ethical framework for household consumption in modern Assam, balancing individual desires with community welfare and sustainability?

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Indian Knowledge System where *dharma* regulates *artha* (wealth) and household expenditure. Classical economic science, particularly consumption theory, views expenditure as a function of income and preferences. However, Sankardev’s philosophy situates expenditure within an ethical–communal paradigm, where spending is not only economic but also moral and cultural. Thus, the framework integrates Neo-Vaishnavite ethics, Keynesian consumption theory, and sustainable consumption studies, enabling analysis of Assamese household expenditure patterns as reflections of both income and value-driven choices.

#### Conceptual Framework: Dharma and Household Expenditure

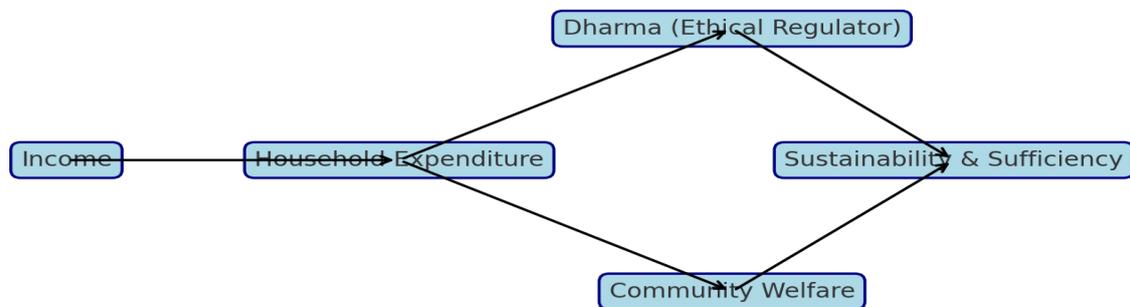


Figure 1

### 4. Objectives

1. To analyze the ethical foundations of household expenditure in Sankardev’s philosophy.
2. To examine how *satra* and *namghar* institutions historically shaped consumption and redistribution of resources in Assam.

### 5. Research Questions

1. How did Sankardev redefine household expenditure in terms of *dharma* and ethics?
2. What role did *satra* and *namghar* institutions play in shaping patterns of resource use in Assamese society?

### 6. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach rooted in cultural-historical and interpretive analysis.

- **Primary Sources:** Texts composed by Srimanta Sankardev such as *Kirtan Ghosa* and *Bhaona* scripts, which embed ethical discourses on life, devotion, and expenditure.

- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly works on Sankardev’s philosophy, Assamese socio-economic history, and contemporary research on consumption ethics.
- **Analytical Framework:** Indian Knowledge System perspectives on *artha* (material prosperity) and *dharma* (righteous living), with a comparative link to contemporary theories of sustainable consumption.

## 7. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of this study bring forward the ways in which Srimanta Sankardev’s teachings provide an enduring framework for understanding household consumption in Assam. By situating expenditure within the moral landscape of *dharma*, Sankardev created an alternative economic model that emphasized moderation, sufficiency, equality, and community welfare. The analysis is presented under four broad but interconnected themes.

### 7.1. Sankardev’s Ethical Economy: Reframing Expenditure

One of the central results of this inquiry is that Sankardev developed what may be described as an “ethical economy.” Unlike mainstream economic systems that treat expenditure primarily as a function of income and consumption needs, Sankardev anchored it in spiritual discipline and moral responsibility. He rejected ritual extravagance that demanded large sacrifices, feasts, or offerings, which were not only economically wasteful but also exclusionary.

His dictum, “Ek Deb, ek Seb, ek bine nai kew” (One God, one devotion, none else), reflected both a spiritual simplification and an economic democratization. By centralizing devotion to a single deity (Krishna), he reduced the proliferation of costly rituals associated with multiple gods and goddesses. This had a direct impact on household expenditure: instead of being burdened by elaborate religious spending, households could direct their limited resources toward community worship in *namghars* and collective cultural activities.

This reframing meant that expenditure was no longer a marker of status or ritual purity but a contribution to community life. The ethical economy promoted by Sankardev thus represents a departure from both feudal ritualism and modern consumerism.

### 7.2. Household Consumption in the Neo-Vaishnavite Framework

The household, for Sankardev, was not merely an economic unit but a moral and cultural institution. In the Neo-Vaishnavite framework, expenditure was expected to reflect values of simplicity, moderation, and devotion. This was deeply aligned with the classical Indic wisdom expressed in the verse:

“কাকচেষ্ঠা বকধ্যানং স্থান নিদ্রা তথা জীরনং।  
অল্পহাৰং ব্ৰহ্মচাৰ্যং বিদ্যাৰ্থী পঞ্চলক্ষণম্॥”

Although originally a guideline for students, its emphasis on minimal eating (*alpa-hāra*), discipline, and purposeful effort resonates with the way Sankardev reoriented household life. Households were encouraged to adopt a similar ethic of moderation in food, clothing, and consumption.

Instead of devoting resources to ostentation, expenditure was redirected into three significant areas:

1. **Collective Worship:** Contributions to the *namghar*—the spiritual heart of Assamese villages—where households pooled resources for prayers, singing (*naam*), and discussions.
2. **Cultural Life:** Investment in *bhaona* (theatrical performances), music, and art, which not only entertained but also educated communities in values of devotion and morality.
3. **Community Dining:** Preparation and distribution of *prasāda* ensured that even the poorest had access to communal meals, reinforcing egalitarianism.

Thus, household consumption was transformed into a vehicle for building **social capital**. It was not merely about individual satisfaction but about strengthening the cultural and spiritual fabric of society. This collective approach to expenditure anticipated modern ideas of redistribution and social investment.

### 7.3. Relevance for Contemporary Assam: Consumerism and Sufficiency

Contemporary Assamese society, like the rest of India, is caught between the pull of consumerism and the push of traditional values. Rising incomes, urbanization, and exposure to global markets have redefined consumption patterns. Status symbols such as branded clothing, lavish weddings, electronic gadgets, and real estate now dominate household aspirations. This often results in indebtedness, social inequality, and environmental stress.

Here, Sankardev's framework offers an indigenous critique of consumerism. His philosophy echoes the modern call to resist overconsumption by emphasizing sufficiency rather than endless growth. Unlike consumerism, which thrives on constant dissatisfaction and the pursuit of "more," Sankardevian ethics promote contentment, moderation, and purposeful spending.

For instance, in modern Assamese villages, households still contribute to community feasts at *namghars*. However, there is a growing tendency for individuals to spend excessively on private ceremonies such as weddings and religious functions, sometimes beyond their means. If revisited, Sankardev's principle could help families strike a balance—channeling resources toward shared cultural-spiritual activities that strengthen the community rather than toward wasteful competition.

In addition, sustainability debates at the global level increasingly advocate for "degrowth" or "post-growth" economies. Sankardev's message aligns with this by suggesting that true prosperity lies not in unbounded consumption but in the ethical and cultural enrichment of society. Thus, the relevance of Sankardev's thought extends far beyond Assam, offering a universal critique of consumerist excess.

## 7.4. Dharma as a Regulator of Expenditure

The most critical finding is that *dharma*—in Sankardev’s framework—acts as a regulator of expenditure. Instead of external rules imposed by markets or governments, it is internalized moral discipline that shapes economic behavior.

For Sankardev, spending was not merely an economic choice but an ethical decision, guided by values of equality, devotion, and inclusivity. For example:

- Wasteful feasting for prestige was condemned.
- Feeding the community through *prasāda* was encouraged.
- Hoarding wealth for personal gain was discouraged, while sharing for collective good was valorized.

This approach situates economics within the Indian Knowledge System’s four-fold *puruṣārthas*—*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*. While *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (desire) are legitimate pursuits, they must be regulated by *dharma* to prevent excess and injustice, ultimately leading toward *mokṣa* (liberation). Sankardev operationalized this philosophy at the level of household expenditure, making every family a participant in the moral economy.

## 7.5. Comparative Insights: Tradition Meets Modernity

The results also suggest a fruitful dialogue between Sankardev’s teachings and modern economic discourses:

1. **Sustainability:** By promoting sufficiency, Sankardev anticipated ecological economics, which calls for limiting consumption to preserve natural resources.
2. **Social Capital:** His emphasis on *namghar* and collective activities resonates with modern theories of social cohesion and trust as vital economic assets.
3. **Ethical Consumerism:** In the same way modern consumers are urged to make fair-trade, eco-friendly choices, Sankardev urged households to align spending with *dharma* and community welfare.
4. **Inclusivity:** By abolishing costly rituals and caste-based exclusion, he democratized access to religious and cultural life—paralleling today’s debates on inclusive development.

Thus, Sankardev’s philosophy represents an indigenous alternative to the dominant paradigm of consumer capitalism, embedding economics within spirituality and ethics.

## 7.6. Challenges in Contemporary Application

While the Sankardevian framework is highly relevant, its application today is not without challenges:

- **Urbanization:** With the weakening of village-based *namghars*, collective expenditure has given way to individualism.

- **Marketization of Religion:** Commercialization of religious festivals has led to new forms of extravagance that contradict Sankardev’s principles.
- **Changing Aspirations:** Younger generations are more influenced by global consumer culture, often prioritizing material over cultural spending.

Nevertheless, these challenges make Sankardev’s philosophy even more important as a counterbalance to modern excess. Reviving his emphasis on moderation, community, and *dharma* could help households navigate these tensions.

## 8. Findings

1. Sankardev’s teachings present a clear critique of wasteful, ritualistic, and status-driven expenditure.
2. Household consumption under his influence became a moral-ethical activity tied to *dharma* and community welfare.
3. Institutions such as *satra* and *namghar* transformed expenditure into collective responsibility, fostering social equality and cohesion.
4. In modern Assam, while consumerist trends dominate, Sankardev’s principles can provide a counterbalance by embedding ethics into economic behavior.
5. His framework aligns closely with global debates on sustainability, showing that indigenous knowledge can enrich contemporary discourses on ethical consumption.

## 9. Conclusion

The discussion reveals that Sankardev’s perspective on expenditure continues to provide relevant insights into both Assamese society and the broader global debate on ethical consumption. By reframing household expenditure within the moral order of *dharma*, he turned economic behavior into a spiritual and social act. His teachings—captured in guiding principles such as “*Ek Deb, ek Seb...*” offer enduring wisdom.

In a world dominated by consumerism, his call to prioritize sufficiency over endless growth presents a profound alternative. Thus, the results establish Sankardev not merely as a religious reformer but as a thinker whose economic vision can guide contemporary debates on sustainability, equity, and community well-being.

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