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Call:  **08813907089**

E-mail ID: ijraset@gmail.com

A Comparative Study of Poetic Rhythms in the Literatures of Shakespeare and Srimanta Sankardeva

Santanu Bhargav

Abstract: *Poetic rhythm is not merely a formal feature of verse but also a reflection of cultural consciousness, aesthetic intention, and social communication. This paper undertakes brief study of the poetic rhythms of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568), two seminal figures in world literature who, though separated by geography and context, both revolutionized literary traditions. Shakespeare, working in Elizabethan England, utilized iambic pentameter and blank verse to explore the complexity of human psychology and dramatic dialogue. Sankardeva, operating in medieval Assam, employed lyrical Borgeet and rhythmic narrative poetry to democratize spirituality and mobilize cultural identity under the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. By analyzing their rhythmic structures, performative functions, and socio-psychological implications, this study reveals how rhythm served not only as an artistic device but also as a vehicle of cultural transformation.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare; Srimanta Sankardeva; poetic rhythm; iambic pentameter; Borgeet; literary comparison; performativity; Bhakti literature; .*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rhythm lies at the heart of poetry. Beyond its aesthetic role, rhythm shapes emotional response, reinforces memory, and anchors cultural values.

William Shakespeare and Srimanta Sankardeva, though belonging to vastly different literary traditions, employed rhythm not merely to delight but to communicate deeper truths about human existence and social order.

While Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter reflected the Renaissance emphasis on humanism, reason, and dramatic complexity, Sankardeva's devotional rhythms embodied collective religiosity, egalitarian spirituality, and oral performativity. A comparative study highlights how poetic rhythm simultaneously functioned as a literary aesthetic and a socio-cultural force.

A. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To analyse the rhythmic techniques employed by Shakespeare and Sankardeva.
- 2) To examine the relationship between rhythm, performance, and audience reception in their works.
- 3) To assess the socio-cultural and psychological functions of rhythm in Elizabethan England and Neo-Vaishnavite Assam.
- 4) To conduct a critical comparative analysis of their rhythmic styles, emphasizing similarities, divergences, and innovations.
- 5) To explore how rhythm contributed to the enduring cultural legacy of both authors.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative literary approach, integrating formalist, cultural, and socio-psychological frameworks.

- 1) Primary Texts: Selected plays and sonnets of Shakespeare; Sankardeva's *Borgeet*, *Kirtan-ghosha*, and *Ankiya Naat*.
- 2) Secondary Sources: Critical studies in Shakespearean poetics (e.g., Abrams, Greenblatt) and scholarship on Sankardeva's literature (e.g., Maheswar Neog, H.K. Barpujari).
- 3) Analytical Tools:
 - o Prosodic analysis (metrical structure, cadence, musicality).
 - o Performance studies (theatre, congregational singing).
 - o Socio-psychological analysis (audience engagement, collective identity).

The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, prioritizing close reading and cultural contextualization.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shakespearean rhythm, particularly iambic pentameter, has been studied extensively. Abrams (1999) emphasizes its flexibility in conveying psychological depth, while Greenblatt (2004) highlights its performative adaptability in the Elizabethan stage. Scholars argue that Shakespeare's rhythm achieved a balance between natural speech and heightened poetic form.

Sankardeva's poetry has been less globally studied but is central to Assamese cultural historiography. Neog (1980) describes his *Borgeet* as blending folk tunes with bhakti emotion, while Sharma (2005) situates Sankardeva's rhythmic innovations within the socio-religious reform movement of Assam. Scholars of bhakti literature argue that rhythm functioned as a tool of accessibility, embodying egalitarianism and oral performance. Comparative studies of rhythm across cultures remain rare. This paper aims to bridge that gap by placing Shakespeare and Sankardeva in a cross-cultural dialogue.

A. Historical and Cultural Context

Shakespeare: Renaissance England

Shakespeare flourished during the English Renaissance, a period of renewed interest in classical learning, humanism, and theatrical experimentation. Rhythm in his plays, especially blank verse, provided the linguistic flexibility necessary for portraying psychological depth, political rhetoric, and dramatic tension.

Sankardeva: Medieval Assam

Sankardeva lived during a period of socio-political flux in Assam. His Neo-Vaishnavite movement aimed to dismantle caste orthodoxy and unite communities through bhakti. Rhythm was central: *Borgeet* (devotional songs) and *Ankiya Naat* (dance-dramas) utilized musical cadences that were accessible to common people, transforming worship into collective performance.

B. Common Rhythms/Maatras Used by Sankardeva

Srimanta Sankardeva in his Borgeets, Ankiya Naat, and other poetic-literary works, used simple yet devotional rhythmic patterns that were accessible to common people. His rhythms combined classical Sanskritic metres with folk rhythms of Assam.

1) Chhāndas (Classical Maatras)

- o He often employed classical Sanskrit metres such as:
 - Anushtubh (8 syllables per pāda, like in the Bhagavad Gita).
 - Shārdūlavikrīḍita (19 syllables per line, used in some verses).
 - Vasantīlakā and Mālinī, occasionally in longer poems.
- o These gave his works a rhythmic dignity but were simplified for popular recitation.

2) Borgeet Rhythms

- o Borgeets (his devotional songs) use rāga-tāla system but with distinctive Assamese adaptation.
- o Common tālas used:
 - Yāti (slow and dignified rhythm).
 - Choutāl (four-beat cycle).
 - Ekatāl (single-beat cycle).
 - Kharamānā (a folk-derived rhythmic pattern).
- o These rhythms made Borgeets devotional, lyrical, and suitable for *Naam-Kirtan*.

3) Ankiya Naat / Bhaona Chhanda

- o For his dramas (Ankiya Naats), Sankardeva used rhythmic recitation metres like:
 - Padavali chhanda (simple couplets).
 - Chaupadi / Panchapadi (four- and five-line verses).
 - Dulari chhanda (used in dialogue delivery).
- o These were meant for oral performance with musical intonation, not just reading.

4) Folk Influence (Ojapali & Kirtan traditions)

- o Sankardeva borrowed rhythms from Ojapali performance (a traditional narrative art).
- o The Naam-Kirtan rhythm (Naam-ghosha) has a cyclical, call-and-response style, easy for community singing.

5) Naam-Ghosa (Madhavdeva, but initiated by Sankardeva)

- o Sankardeva's disciples (especially Madhavdeva) followed his rhythm:
 - Bhakti-rasa chhanda – smooth, flowing, musical.
 - Simple metrical units (pada-based) so villagers could memorise.



Sankardeva's poetry, especially in *Borgeet* (devotional songs), was meant to be sung with tala (beats) and raga (melodic mode). The rhythm followed a syllabic-melodic pattern rather than fixed foot-metrics like iambs. A typical stanza (transliterated from Assamese):

"Mana re, Krishna charana smaraṇa kara,

Ananta dukkha bhava sindhu tari jāva."

("O mind, remember the feet of Krishna; by them you will cross the endless ocean of sorrow.")

Rhythmic pattern (using 8 + 8 syllabic grouping):

Ma-na re | Krish-na cha-ra-na | sma-ra-ṇa ka-ra

(4+4 beats, pause)

A-nan-ta duk-kha | bha-va sin-dhu | ta-ri jā-va

(4+4 beats, pause)

The verses are musical-cadential, meant to be accompanied by cymbals, khol (drum), and congregational singing. Unlike Shakespeare's foot-based metrical regularity, Sankardeva's rhythm is song-based and cyclical, embodying repetition and spiritual absorption.

2) Performative Function

- Shakespeare's Rhythm: Designed for the stage, rhythm guided actors' delivery, audience attention, and emotional pacing. The blank verse rhythm mirrored natural speech but heightened its impact. Created tension and pacing in drama. For example, the alternating beats in Julius Caesar's famous line:

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

follows the pentameter but allows rhetorical pauses that build persuasive force.

- Sankardeva's Rhythm: Designed for collective worship, rhythm guided congregational singing (*nama-prasanga*), unifying participants in devotional ecstasy.

It invited **collective participation**. In *nama-prasanga* (congregational singing), the cyclical tala created trance-like devotion. Repetition of Krishna's name, set in rhythm, induced **collective effervescence** (Durkheim).

3) Psychological Dimension

- Shakespeare: Rhythm deepened psychological realism. Variations in meter mirrored inner conflict (e.g., Hamlet's hesitation). Variation in rhythm mirrors psychological nuance. Hamlet's broken rhythms convey hesitation:

"To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub."

The pause and caesura (—) interrupt the iambic flow, enacting inner turmoil.

- Sankardeva: Rhythm served as psychological catharsis, allowing suppressed communities to express devotion freely through music, reducing social anxiety.

Rhythm provides psychological release. Singing in unison with instruments allowed individuals to express suppressed emotions in a socially sanctioned way. The rhythm's repetitiveness (chant-like cadence) fostered meditative calm, contrasting Shakespeare's restless rhythmic shifts.

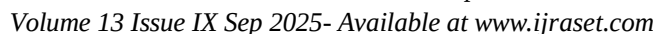
4) Social Function

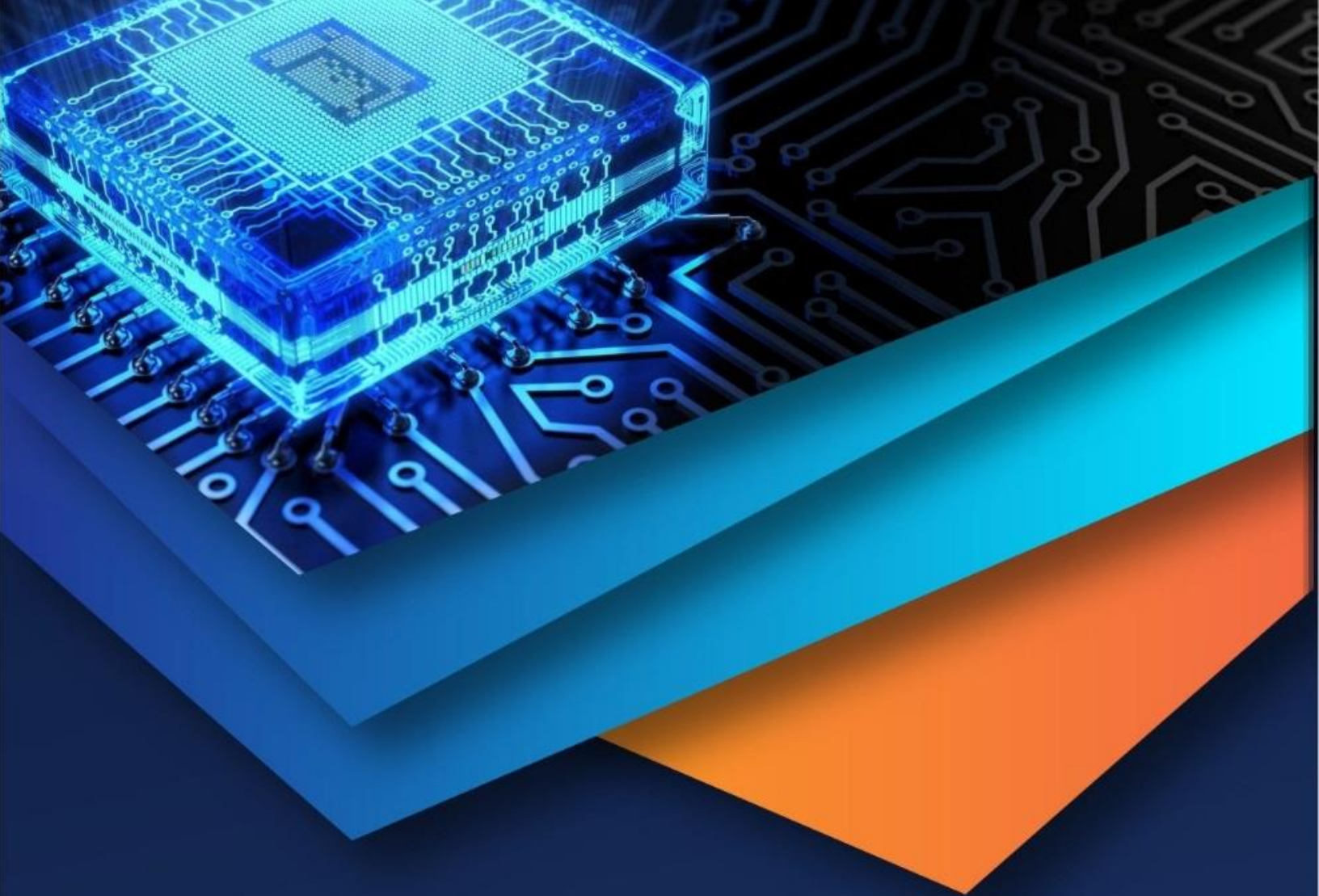
- Shakespeare: Rhythm reinforced Renaissance ideals of eloquence and individual expression; it appealed across classes in the Globe Theatre.

Rhythm worked on the Elizabethan stage to bridge classes—appealing to groundlings (through prose or rhythmic variation) and elites (through formal pentameter).

- Sankardeva: Rhythm democratized religion by bypassing priestly mediation. Collective singing erased caste distinctions, at least temporarily.

Rhythm was central to bhakti democratization. The accessible, song-like cadence brought lower-caste and marginalized groups into the spiritual fold, bypassing Sanskrit ritualism.





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