

Sankaradeva's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The religions of the world had been expressions of the human spirit to grasp the nature of the universe, to understand man's relation to it, cultivate that kind of thought, emotion and conduct which benefits man's place in the universe. Though philosophy and religion differed from each other in the sense that the former adopted critical reflection and the latter a matter of faith, yet almost all major religions had a philosophical leaning. This meeting point of philosophy and religion developed a sphere of study which may be termed as Religious Philosophy. Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism had not only been a sect of Vaishnavism but also a reformation of Hinduism itself. Though it had been a part of the Vaic Gava reform movement which gained momentum in the Northern part of India in the 15th and 16th century, it involved certain unique features of its faith and practices. The influence of Neo-Vaishnavism had been noteworthy in shaping a particular way of life, which is enriched with distinct moral values, social norms and cultural order centered on the spiritual ideal of the ultimate unity of everything. Therefore, it is found justified to study and enquire into the philosophy of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism. In this study, the data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primarily, Analytic Method of study is used, as the collected data are critically analyzed to find out solutions in context of the objective. But the Interpretative Method is used too while determining the meaning of certain literary phrases and statements.

Keywords: Philosophy, Neo-Vaishnavism, Social Philosophy, Philosophy of Culture

Introduction:

Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has been a social and religious reform movement found momentum in 16th century Assam. The religious notions found by Sankaradeva stands separate to a great extent from those of the Vedantin philosophers like Sankarāchārya, Rāmānujāchārya in one hand, and from the Vaishnavas like Sri Caitanya, Jayadeva, whose adherence too is to the Bhāgavata Purāna like Sankaradeva. Apart from this, the social and cultural implication of Sankaradeva's movement is particularly noteworthy amongst his contemporaries belonging to the Bhakti Movement. Sankaradeva has not interpreted Brahmasūtra but accepted Bhāgavata Purāna as the essence of all Vedānta (Sarva - Vedānta -Sāram). But his religious tenets are not counterfeiting of the sources as usually charged off. In spite of being profound to the sources, Sankaradeva has catalyzed distinct, authentic and influential beliefs, precepts and ideals. The impetus of Neo-Vaishnavism has not been only of a religious sect of Hinduism, but it has given rise to a distinct ethical, social, cultural order and a unique way of life.

DISCUSSION:

For clear and detail exposition of the subject matter, the data are analyzed under six categories. At the outset, I have found it relevant to include a concise account of the major works of Sankaradeva. A brief discussion of the influences and other literary sources that influenced Sankaradeva's thoughts and works are also made before going into detail study of his ideas and ideals. Kirttana Ghosā (mainly influenced from the Bhāgavata Purāna), Gunamālā (quintessence of Bhāgavata Purāna), Harishchandra

Upakhyāna (Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna), Rukmiṇī Harana Kāvya (Harivamśa, Bhāgavata Purāna), Bali Chalana (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book VII), Amṛta Manthana (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book VIII). Ajāmila Upākhyāna- (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book VI, - Kurukṣetra (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book X) Bhakti Pradīpa, Nīlī Navasiddha Samvāda (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book XI, Anādi Pātana (Bhāgavata Purāna, Book II, III, V, XI, XII), Bhakti Ratnākara (Bhāgavata Purāna and other sources) Bargeet (great holy songs, available extant 35), Bhatimā (panegyrics, total-21), Totaya (a kind of prayer song in Sanskrit in Totaka meter).

Patnī Prasāda, Pārijata Harana, Kāliya Damana, Keli Gopāla, Rukmiṇī-Harana, Srīrāma Vijaya.

Sankaradeva has used three languages in his writings. The Bhakti Ratnākara, the Totaya and the Śloka in the dramas are in Sanskrit. The Bargeet, the Bhatimā and the Nāt are in Vrajāvalī or Vrajābulī and the other remaining works are in Assamese with the influence of dialectics of certain places of then Assam. Sankaradeva's writings are chiefly derived from Sanskrit sources. So, many critics argue that he is not an original thinker, a translator only. But that is not a fair judgment because Śankaradeva has shown originality in his translation.

Religious Philosophy:

Religious Philosophy is understood as philosophical thinking inspired and directed by a particular religion.

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Sankaradeva is known as Ekasārana Namadharmā i. e. taking refuge to one and only one God (Ekasārana) and chanting the name (Nama) and glorification of God is the way of devotion to Him. It is also called Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma as it treats God as Mahāpuruṣa, or Paramā Puruṣa. Being a follower of Bhāgavata Purāṇa, it is also known as Bhāgavati Dharma. The exploration of the Religious Philosophy of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism requires the exploration of following tenets of the creed.

In theology, it is found that Sankaradeva was the preacher of Monotheism. The basic principle of his thought enjoins the worship of one God.

There is no difference between Nirguṇa Brahman and Saguṇa Īśvara. Brahman is Nirguṇa only is the sense of Nirduṣa that means free from all the demerits of the Rājas and Tamas but he is considered as being Suddha Sattva or Pure Existence, the abode of all Sāttvic guṇas. The devotees are inclined to hear and chant the merit and glory of God.

Following Bhāgavata tradition, Sankaradeva describes twenty-four incarnations of KṛcGa, God per excellence i. e. KṛcGastu Bhagavān Swayam. Unlike Rāmānuja and other Vedāntin philosophers, Incarnation is not of VicGu but of KṛcGa Himself Sankaradeva has chosen to emphasize more on KicGa than VicGu in his Neo-Vaiṣṇavism.

In cosmology, Sankaradeva maintains the world as exposition of Brahman by the power of illusion or Māyā. Brahman or God is both material (upādāna) and efficient (nimitta) cause of the world. He is cause (kāraGa) as well as effect (kārya). As ornaments of gold does not differ from gold itself, so there is no distinction between God as the cause and God as the effect.

Brahman is all pervading irrespective of space and time. But this all pervasiveness does not mean His identity with worldly existence. Rather, it means that the world is grounded on God and God is also

manifested through the world. In Him the world exists yet He transcends the world. Thus, Panentheism is there in Sankaradeva's philosophy regarding the relationship between God and the world.

The individual self or jivatman is unchangeable, all pervasive and full of calm (avikāri vicGuh śānta), a part of the Highest Self.

In Sankaradeva's view God is the self-dwelling reality everywhere. It is said, Tumi ātmā tumāka najane ekujane- it means "Thou art the self, this fact is not known to the ignorant man". God is everywhere, in each of the body as the indwelling soul. He says that the soul is the part of God-Tumarexe amša āmi yata jivajāka and jiva amse tumi pravešila gāwe gāwe.

Following the ideal and scriptures of Hinduism, Sankaradeva explains bondage and suffering with the help of the Law of Karma. In the Bhagavadgita, it is stated that creatures take their birth and are subjected to pleasure and pain, afflictions and fears due to Karma. Life cannot be one of inaction, it may be either good or bad action. People enjoy or suffer as inevitable consequences of their deeds.

At the same time as a devotionalist Sankaradeva emphasizes more on Bhaktimarga than Karmamarga. Because it is Bhakti or devotion that raises knowledge, inspires for action. The highest end i.e., Parama Gati could be achieved by self-surrender and self-abnegation at the lotus feet of God. One may get rid of one's karma bandhana by one-minded devotion to God, by earning his grace.

Šankaradeva's creed is a middle way which does never favor asceticism. It is the way where living in a family life man can attain the company of God. i.e. grhate thakiya dekhilu taju carana. Moreover, not only videhamukti but jivanmukti too is accepted in Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism.

Bhakti is the core of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaišnavism. The way of liberation in Indian tradition shows the three ways of Jnana, Karma and Bhakti. This is described in the Bhagavadgita itself, but the Bhagavata Purana shows Bhakti or devotion as the golden path. Bhakti is categorized into viddha (selfish) and suddha (selfless). The viddha bhakti is itself divided into karma viddha (ritualistic). The bhakti preached by Sankaradeva is an end-in-itself, the pancama purusartha and jnana viddha (intellectualistic). Ritualistics are called bubhuksu (hungry) for they make sacrifices for own interest. The intellectual are called mumuksu (salvation seekers) who take recourse in meditation etc. Suddha bhakti is characterized by being ahaituki (love for the sake of love), apratihata (uninterrupted) and abhyabhicari (unadulterated).

Everyone right from the chandala, sudra, women have the right to hari bhakti or to devout God. In the section 'Sri K [cGar Vaikuntha Prayān' of the Kirttana Ghocā, it is stated that "Stri sudre kare jadi āmāka bhakati tāhāte kahibā itu jānā mahāmati"- whether women or lower-class people if devout to God can be recognized as wise. Moreover, devotion requires no priest; the grace of God is not in the keeping of any man. It is rightly marked by scholar Dimbeswar Neog in his work "Jagat-Guru Sankardew: The Founder of Mahapurism" that "Castless and priestless society was a logical conclusion of Sree Sree Shankar Deva's teachings, and he strove for its realization throughout his life and against great odds".

The Bhāgavata PurāGa distinguishes four types of knowledge-NirguGa, Sāttvika, Rājasika and Tāmasika. Sankaradeva includes this concept of Bhāgavata in his Bhakti Ratnākara and describes the nature of the four kinds of knowledge. While as a religious leader, Sankaradeva

accepts Sabda or testimony as one of the pramānas or sources of knowledge, he compares Tarka or logic with a terrible tigress – Tarka sāstra mahābyāghri. Logic may be helpful in knowing the empirical world, but cuts a sorry figure while going to know God. The very meaning and aim of religion are well-being of humanity and the entire cosmos as expression of the Divine Reality. Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism too is based on the ethical values of self-control, endurance, equality, fraternity, compassion, humility, equality directed towards both individual and social welfare.

He did not attempt to demolish the then existing caste system, preached his disciples not to adopt hatred towards others faith. He rejected caste superiority as a ground of respect among man, otherwise equally venerable as lovers of God. Being indifferent towards the caste system he opened the door of haribhakti or devotion to all irrespective of caste, race or even religion. Everyone from the Brahmin to Chandāla has the right to worship God (Chandāla paryanta kari hari- bhakti- adhikāri). By composing great scriptures in simple language, he opened the door of knowledge even to the illiterate, to the women, placed worship to the extent of even the poorest by establishing Nāmadharma instead of costly ritualism.

Śankaradeva was a versatile genius having reached to literature, art and culture etc. His ways adopted for religious preaching were very effective. In this regard he composed poetry, drama, song, dance, musical instrument, and a special place of worship called the Nāmghar in addition to the Satra institutions. The tools used by Sankaradeva to make the religion acceptable have given rise to a sociocultural renaissance. He composed books in Assamese language too using VaicGava themes, applied performing arts while preaching his tenets. It is, therefore, necessary to mark his choosing the way of culture to propagate religiosity than any other ways. He thought culture to the most effective means for touching the heart, mind and soul of man.

This human life is much valuable and hard to find, even aspired by the gods. Moreover, the life in Bhāratavarca is praised in the Kirttana Ghocā too with Bhakti Ratnākara. There is no other place of action better than Bhārata-Bhārata xamāna karmabhumi āna nāi.

In the course of study some contradictory views are found in Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavite doctrine. For instance, sometimes he seems to accept PariGāmvāda and also in certain cases his tendency towards Prativimbavāda is found with regard to the relationship between the world and man.

CONCLUSION:

An objective enquiry into the principles and ideals of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism, leads to the following conclusions though Śankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism is a - part of the Vaisnavite Bhakti Movement those revolved in different parts of India, it stands with certain unique features of its faiths, principles, ideals and practices. Yet, anyone in search of philosophy in the sense of independent and critical theory may be disenchanted. Because it is the religious, social, moral philosophy; over and above a practical philosophy of life which is inherent in Sankaradeva's NeoVaisnavism.

Sankaradeva's aim and objective was never to develop any theory or philosophical creed, but the noble aim was to reform the malpractices of the society. The ultimate aim was well-being of the individuals, morally organized society, where NeoVaisnavism was the most effective way. It is because the philosophy behind this movement is that of Spiritualism and Monistic Idealism. Śankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism could be characterized as a renaissance with an attitude against the existing order of human

life, endeavor for its reformation. He never protested against VarGadharna but amalgamated all in his creed. Therefore, in spite of being indifferent to VarGasystem it opened the door of devotion to all.

Human being and their worldly existence is given worth in Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism. He has never supported asceticism. But the establishment of spiritual fraternity in the household life, in a well-organized, cultured society.

Therefore, Humanism, though not secular but theistic is the core philosophy of this religious movement. Equality, non-violence, compassion is the mostly emphasized values along with other moral and religious norms. Malpractices like animal sacrifice, mere external ritualism in the name of religion, division of man on the basis of caste and creed etc. have no place in his new religious ideal.

The Philosophy of Life is that of optimism in Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism, where human life is not an illusion. Though it is temporary, is worthy and even the object of aspiration of the gods. He has firm faith in the ability of every human being, and for development of their personality and ability. The methods used by Sankaradeva while disseminating the message of Neo-Vaisnavism includes the thoughts.

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