

THE INTERPRETATION OF THEISTIC BELIEF IN SANKARADEVA'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT:

Generally, theistic belief is considered as a belief in divine things or as a faith in a power beyond man. It may be - belief in one God or in many gods. Sankaradeva, flourished in 15th-16th centuries, is considered as the propagator of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. The theistic belief of neo-Vaishnavism is based on faith and devotion on a single divinity instead of traditional Brahmanism.

This paper tried to interpret the neo-Vaishnavite faith in the name of God and tried to preach and spread bhakti as a way to worship God to make a strong spiritual life.

KEY-WORDS: neo-Vaishnavism, God, *Brahman*, *māyā*, bhakti

Sankaradeva, the propagator of neo-Vaishnavism, was basically a religious guru or teacher. The religion of Sankaradeva is known as 'Eka Śaraṇa Harinama Dharma.' Although, Sankaradeva did not concern with any philosophical discourse, yet he based his religious faith on Vedānta.

Sankaradeva's neo-Vaishnavism carried a new theistic belief in Assam. His religion based on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Bhagavad Gītā. As a religious guru Sankaradeva believes in God, who is real and Supreme Reality. The Supreme Reality or *Brahman* is the only ontological reality. *Brahman* is pure identity. *Brahman* is also known as Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu, the highest God. Sankaradeva accepts the Supreme Reality or *Brahman* as the cause of all things and beings. He stated in his 'Kirtana-ghosā' as –

'prathame praṇāmo brahmarupi Sanātana

sarba avatārar karana nārāyana'

Sankaradeva has interpreted that there are different names of the Supreme Reality or God, they are- *Brahman*, *Paramātman* and *Bhagavat*. When God appears to Yogins in their meditation, He is known as *Brahman*; when He directs and controls the senses, He is known as *Paramātman*; and as the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world, He is known as *Bhagavat*. *Brahman*, *Paramātman* and *Bhagavat* are the names of the same Supreme Nārāyaṇa.

Sankaradeva regards God as eternal, omnipresent and omniscient. He is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The distinction between indeterminate and determinate *Brahman* of Advaita Vedānta was reflected in the philosophy of Sankaradeva. For Sankaradeva, the supreme reality is *Nirguna Brahman*. *Brahman* conditioned by *Māyā* is God. He is the personal God. Sankara believes *māyā* as the power that creates illusion. *Māyā* has two actions- projection and concealment. Sankaradeva explained the relation between Supreme Reality and the world with the example of rope-snake illusion. Therefore, according to Sankaradeva, liberation means destruction of *adhyāsa*. He considers that the souls and matters are real like God. But they depend for their existence on God.

The main theme of Sankaradeva's religion is the love of God or bhakti. Bhakti is an act of emotion. The two main characteristics of bhakti are the complete self-surrender to God and an emotional feeling of joy and happiness in serving or worshipping Him. In '*Bhakti-pradipa*', he elaborates the worship of other deities in preference to Krishna-bhakti. According to Sankaradeva, there are three ways to attainment of liberation-karma, jñāna and bhakti. Sankaradeva accepts *śravaṇa* and *kirtana* as the best means of liberation. In the '*kirtana-ghosā*,' bhakti is stated as *śravaṇa*, *kirtana*, *smarana*, *archana*, *padasevana*, *dāsyā*, *sakhitva*, *bandana* and *deha arpana*. *Śravaṇa* is the act of listening to the description of the form, sports and names of Krishna from the lips of holy persons; *kirtana* is the act of chanting prayers; *smarana* is the act of remembering the form, sports and names of Krishna; *archana* is the rite of ceremonial or non-ceremonial worship; *padasevana* is the act of serving the feet of the Lord by different devotional paths; *dāsyā* is the act of worshipping and serving the God with the attitude of a self-surrendering servant; *sakhitva* means the sense of friendship between the worshipper and the worshipped; *deha arpana* is the complete self-surrender to God. Among all of these, Sankaradeva gives much importance only on *śravaṇa-kirtana*. The bhakti may be classified into *sakāma* bhakti or desire for result and *niskāma* bhakti or desireless. Only *niskāma* bhakti gives the way to liberation.

Sankaradeva's Eka Śaraṇa Nama Dharma, a religion based on bhakti believes in supreme surrender to one God that is Krishna or Nārāyaṇa, whose name is Rāma, Hari, Vāsudeva, Viṣṇu, Keśava, Mādhava, Govinda, Janārdana etc. The conception of relationship between God and his devotee is like that between an all powerful and all merciful master and his servant whose humility and self-surrender to his master is extreme. In his '*Bhakti-ratnākara*', Sankaradeva stated that the jīvas are no means different from *Brahman*. According to Sankaradeva, the jīvas are not real transformations of *Brahman* but are apparent names and forms. For Sankaradeva, God is the material as well as the efficient cause of the universe.

Sankaradeva accepts God as real, because for bhakti such a real God is necessary. Among the *avatāras* of Nārāyaṇa, Krishna is regarded as the most perfect. Krishna for him is the ideal God who can satisfy all the human desires. Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva is uncompromising in its attitude against the worship of other gods and goddesses. He denies idol worship. The Upanishad says, *ekam eva advitīyam*, 'He is the One without a second'.

According to Sankaradeva, *Brahman* or God cannot be known by intellect or reasoning. As a religious Guru, Sankaradeva believes in intuitive knowledge than logic. Only intuition gives the knowledge of God. This knowledge is trans-empirical and this type of knowledge arises due to the earnest devotion of the devotee to God. He emphasizes bhakti as the way to the attainment of God. In true sense, bhakti means purity of mind, body and spirit. According to Sankaradeva, a true devotee can attain the liberation only in chanting and hearing God's name.

The '*Brahma-sutra*' of Badarayana is the first book on the Vedānta. The '*Brahma-sutra*' was explained differently by different thinkers on the basis of different religious sects and philosophical perspectives. Sankaradeva's religion gives equal stress upon the highest of the upanisadic teachings. Sankaradeva has given importance to the monistic attitude of God.

Sankaradeva's neo-Vaishnavism accepts both *nirguna* and *saguna* aspects of God. But he laid more stress on the *saguna* aspect for the purpose of devotion or *saguna* aspect is more suitable for the cultivation of devotion. Devotion to Nārāyaṇa is the only path through which the indeterminate and transcendental God can be realised.

Bhakti, as shown by Sankaradeva, is considered as the easiest way to reach God and through this man may make himself spiritually strong avoiding the worldly attachment and all the difficulties. Therefore, Sankaradeva's theistic belief shows the direction towards a peaceful society irrespective of any creed or caste.

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