

Secularism in Neo-vaisnavism of Sankaradeva

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Abstract

Vaisnavite scholar Sankaradeva revolutionized the typical vaisnava thought and placed it in a more simple form, called Neo-vaisnavism, it became a platform for humanity, irrespective to religion, caste and creed. This new edition of vaisnavism promotes unity in diversity, tolerance and mutual respect towards all being. This socio-religio-cultural platform was made open for all to encourage fraternity and brotherhood among the people of medieval Assam. For him all the people are equal in the eyes of God and everybody has the right to search for God, thus the monotheistic philosophy of Sankaradeva was based on equality and gender equity.

Keywords

Neo-Vaisnavism, secularism, fraternity, unity

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Introduction

Religion is a matter of life and experience which touches the total individuality with all the aspects of an individual's life. It is more personal, more spiritual. It is the way to unfold the mystery of life. Many times we surrender to a guru for the answers, who leads us and heals our curious thought. The history of mankind is the witness of such gurus who revolutionized the human life and the world by their innovative thoughts, outstanding talents. Mahapurush Sankaradeva, who was primarily a spiritual leader and a social reformer, was a guru revered by the people of Assam. Sankaradeva revolutionized the vaisnavite thought and placed it in a more simple form, called Neo-vaisnavism. Irrespective to any caste and creed, anybody and everybody could join and taste the flavor of secularity and spirituality within it. This new edition of vaisnavism promotes unity in diversity, tolerance and mutual respect towards all being. In one sense, it became an all-inclusive whole of all the ingredients of a socio-religio-moral life.

Sankaradeva, the multi-talented gem who had expertise in diverse areas - music, dance, painting, weaving; lyricist, playwright, Composer, poet, actor, architect, sculptor, instrumentalist, Sanskrit scholar, religious guru, philosopher and above all he was a revolutionist, the social reformer of medieval Assam. This great Vaisnava philosopher was born in

Alipukhuri, Nagaon in 1449 and took his last breath of a blessed life in 1569 A.D.

A glimpse of Sankaradeva's talent:

1. Religious books: The Kirtana, Gunamala, Bhakti Ratnakar, Bhakti Pradeep, Nimi-Nabasiddha Sambad, Anadi Patan
2. Epic: Harichandra Upakhyan, Rukmini Haran
3. Ankia Drama: Patni Prasad, Parijat Haran, Rukmini Haran, Kaliya Daman, Keli Gopal, Ram Vijay
4. Translation: The Bhagawata- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 8th, 10th, 11th, 12th canto, Uttarakhand Ramayana, Balichalan 3rd canto, Ajamil Upakhyan 6th, Amrit Manthan 8th, Adi and Sesh Dasam 10th canto.
5. Borgeet: 120 devotional songs.
6. Bhatima: Dev Bhatima, Raj Bhatima, Bhat Bhatima, Muktimangal Bhatima, Totaya, Chapaya
7. Vrindavani Vastra, woven in 1567, Tantikuchi, Barpeta under the patronage of Chilarai and Naranarayana. Now it is preserved in the British Museum.
8. Bhaona: It is the collective effort of the group of gayan – bayan, actors (having musk) as well as the audience. The first Bhaona was performed in 1390 saka, Chihnayatra. It is an assemblance of Hasya (humor), Bira(heroic), Santa (calm), Sringara(erosic), and Karuna (pathetic), Rasa (sentiment).
9. Architecture: Namghar or the prayer hall, Manikut with Simhasana.
10. Satra: Religio-cultural platform

11. Musical instrumentalist: Khol(drum), Taal(cymbal), bhortal (a kind of cymbal in big size, hired from the Bhutias).
12. Dance (Satriya / Sankari)

1. Emergence of Neo-vaisnavism

Sankaradeva's religious system is based on the Bhagavata – purana. The Bhagavata-purana fixes God as the ultimate essence of the universe, and calls him Brahman, Paramatman, and Bhagavat. Idol worship is absent in Sankaradeva's system. Instead of Radha-Krishna, only worship of Krishna is acknowledged in Neo-vaisnavite system. It is primarily based on Bhakti cult. There are nine modes of Bhakti - Sravana, kirtana, smarana, padasevana, archana, vandana, dasya, sakhya, atmanivedana. Of these, Sankaradeva considered sravana (listening) and kirtana (enchanting) of the name of the Bhagawata or Absolute soul, to be sufficient. (Neog 1967 :35)

The advent of Sankaradeva in Assam in the 16th century is usually taken as a turning point in the religious history of Assam. The emergence of the neo-vaisnavite movement launched by Sankaradeva (1449-1568) preached the most simple but a very ingenious means of Bhakti Cult which was a casteless theme. Prior to his time, Sakta practices were prevalent in many areas, and Siva, Durga, and Kali were the dominant deities. During the reign of Ahom king Siu Hung Mung (1497-1539) in the 15th and 16th century A.D., Sankaradeva preached Vaisnavism in a very popular way. He preached the creed of Ek Saran, that is, surrender to one God. Madhavdev and Damodardev led this Neo-Vaisnavite movement and religious transformation among the culturally backward common people in the plains of Assam and introduced social refinements into the social habits of these people. Sankaradeva combined diverse elements of culture, indigenous and foreign, in dress, tune, instrumental music, art, and dance into an attractive local pattern to serve as a medium for congregational prayer to God. He made the pleasure of culture an adjunct to religion. Mahapurush Sankaradeva propagated the Neo-Vaisnavite religion expressive of the greatness of Lord Krishna among the Assamese people.

2. Sankaradeva's Secular Perspective

This paper intends to highlight the Secularist perspective as the most powerful tenet of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva. Books and personal observation are used as both primary and secondary data to prepare this paper. The paper is descriptive in nature, presented from the philosophical standpoint.

Secularism in Sankaradeva's Neo-vaisnavism:

The multidimensional contributions of Sankaradeva to Assamese society in order to live a cultured life by fulfilling the ultimate aim of human life through his religion (Bhakti cult) are like the establishment of –Satra Sabha, Naam ghar, Integrity among various castes and tribes, equality, creation

of literary works, music, dance, dramatization, musical instruments, architecture, and sculpture. In the Kirtan Ghosa, Sankaradeva again asserts, "Nelage bhakatita deva dvija rishi huibe. Nelage adbhuta Sastra Vistara janeba" –It is not required to be Gods, Brahmins, and sages to follow the path of Devotion and to be well-versed in all religious Scriptures. Rather, he encourages following his religion of love and devotion. Everyone can follow this without any caste distinction, thus instead of a Brahmin, a low-caste person can hold his religion. Such a liberal secular attitude has encouraged the people of Assam to build up a society based on spirituality and fraternity.

Apart from all his religious duties, Sankaradeva devoted his entire life to organizing social life. Satra institution and Naamghar (prayer hall) are the two great pillars of Neo-Vaisnavism founded by Sankaradeva and are the centers of spiritual enlightenment. In Naamghar, prayer is sung with forceful clapping. In this activity, heavy pressure occurs on the fingers. The pressure speeds up the circulation of blood in the vessels and arteries. This process removes the blockages in the veins. The prasad taken by the bhaktas after prayer contains scientific facts also. The raw ginger (chlorogenic acid) mixed with prasad fuels the process of digestion, chewing a piece of sugarcane is just like mouthwash. Unknowingly the village people are following the scientific way by heart; the actual credit goes to Sankaradeva's scientific mind. Naamghar is the spiritual and cultural platform founded by Sankaradeva, open for all. Being a religious authority, Naamghar being a community center plays the most important role in integrating Assamese society till date. Centering round the Naamghar in each village or city, the life of Assamese people has been well-regulated either spiritually or socially. Till date, Naamghar plays a vital role for national unity as it is the platform of an assemblance of devotees from any caste or tribe, of Sravana–kirtana (listening and enchanting) of the glory of God. In one sense, it is the control room of Assamese society; each and every village has their Naamghars. It is the non-governmental democratic institution of public judiciary system. Again Satras bear the unique togetherness of Guru (God), Deu (priest), Bhakat(worshipper), and naam (prayer), the center of Eksarana tradition of Neo-vaisnavism regulates the Naamghars. Satra and Naamghar both are democratic institutions and are cultural centers.

Srimanta Sankaradeva tried to unite the people from all the areas i.e, hills and plains, from any religious faith, irrespective of high or low Caste and creed. Through the Bhakti dharma he opened it for all. His justification for it is that all have the right to love Hari as all creatures are the manifestations of one ultimate God.

Orthodox casteism is totally absent in this form of religion. Therefore in Sankaradeva's system, we find Brahman disciples of Sudra teachers. Among the disciples of Sankaradeva were Chandsai and Jayahari Jawan, both were Mussalmans; Narottam (Naga); Govinda Garamoni (Garo); Jayananda/Joyram(bhutia); Madhaba (Hira); Srirama (kaivarta);

Damodara (Bania); Paramananda (Miri). As a result of such a secularist view within a religion, it made possible the inclusion of people from different tribes and castes, i.e., Kirat, Khasi, Garo, Miri, Yawan, Kanka, Goal, Ahom, Moluk, Rajak, Turuk, Khat, Mush, Chandal, etc. It is reflected in the Bhagawata of Sankaradeva:

“Kirata Kachari Turuk
Koivarta Mlecha Chandal
Anojatanara Krishna Sevaka
Sangata Pabitra Hol
Bhakti labhiya sansara taria
Baikuntha sukhe chalaya. . .
Khasi Garo Miri
Yavana Kanaka Goal
Asom Muluk Rajak”

Again, it is well expressed in the following lines: Kirata Kachari Khasi Garo Miri, Javana, Kanka Goal. Asom muluka dhua je Turuk, kuwas mlecha chandal. Aanu papi nara Krishna sewakara sangata pavitra hoi. Bhakati labhia sansara taria baikunthe sukhe chalay.”(Dutta Barua 1974)

Another importance is found in the names of devotees; their names are suffixed with either *atoi* or *hari bhakat*. So that they can be only known as a devotee.

Sankaradeva created the socio-religious-cultural platform open for all and encouraged fraternity and brotherhood among people. For him, all the people are equal in the eyes of God and everybody has the right to search for God.

“Brahmanara chandalara nibichari kul
Datata Churata yara dristi ek tul.
Nicata sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana.
Tehakesa pondita buliya sarvajana”

(The Bhagawata/ kirtan ghosa: 208)

(One who can realize the omnipresent form of God and have faith in it, everyone seems to be of equal status in his eye.)

He had given emphasis on culturing empathy for other fellow beings also. “Kukkura srigala gardabharu atma Ram. . . Jania sabaka pari kariba pranam” (Kirtana aru Namghosa)...Even the dogs, jackals, and asses are verily God, and keeping this view in mind, they should be saluted. Thus all living beings should be treated as equal to one’s self.

The following lines of Sankaradeva inheres the gist of Secularism or *Sarva dharma sambhava*. “..anyone who accepts this religion should not envy the religion of others, rather he should treat all religions as equal and to be true to it under all circumstances. . . and be kind to all living creatures.”

“Parara Dharmaka nihimsiva kadacit,
Kariva bhutak daya sakaruna cit.
Huiva santa citta sarvadharmata vatsala
Ehi Bhagavata dharma yan a mahavala.
(Sri Sankaravyakyamit, ed.Dutta Barua, v.141:67)

The teaching of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva is again based on religious tolerance. To him, if everyone begins to tolerate the religions of other people, then the whole world will be free of communal conflict and rivalry, and as a result, peace and harmony will prevail both in national and international life. So, for Sankaradeva toleration is one of the important tenets of Indian secularism, and this should be encouraged among the followers of different religious communities with utmost caution and care.

Sankaradeva introduces community dining and sanctimoniousness in dining in order to bring out unity and integrity among his disciples, who came from diverse races and tribes living in different parts of Assam. In fact, Sankaradeva in the medieval period left no stone unturned to remove the age-old misunderstanding from the minds of all backward races and tribes of Assam by the help of his new faith and thereby established a stable, permanent, and unified society here. In this sense, he should be treated as one who strove for the unity and integrity of mankind as a whole. This is also another valuable tenet of Indian Secularism contained in the simple and liberal teachings of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva.

3. Conclusion

Sankaradeva was not primarily a speculative thinker. His ideal was not to propound a religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system based on devotion and faith.(Sarma1966) Sankaradeva wake a new faith to promote welfare of all living being and emphasized the message of universal brotherhood , religious tolerance and secularism. As S.K. Chatterjee has rightly expressed that Sankaradeva was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest Indians, and he deserved to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya ,Basavappa Ramananda , Kabir, Chaitanyadeva, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidasa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of Medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.(Chatterji 1974 :71)

The perspective of Sankaradeva’s religious philosophy was to build a society by combating superstition and casteism. Relying on the *eksarana* the basic belief expressed in his Borgeets : “Eesha swarupe Hari saba ghate baithaha jaisana gagana biyapi”(God is present everywhere, in everything), “Jata jeeba jangama keeta patangama, Aga naga jaga teri kaya” (All living beings are your offshoots).

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