



Research Paper

A Comparative Study Between The Neo-Vaisnavism Of Srimanta Sankardeva And The Other Vaisnavite Saints Of India

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ABSTRACT: Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569), an immensely gifted genius, blessed this pristine land of Assam in the 15th and 16th Centuries with his theological teachings, blended with various colours of social and cultural elements. However, this valley on either side of the mighty Brahmaputra was not a set stage for him to let the essence of Bhakti movement flow smoothly. The people in this region were curled in the wreaths of Tantraism, illiteracy, lingering amidst caste discriminations and socio political segregation and conflicts. Faith, culture, society and the prospect of a future of a greater integrated nation were in a pandemonium. Shankardeva not only spread the cult of Bhakti Movement in Assam but also enriched the people socially, culturally and laid the foundation of a greater Assamese nation. Assam presented a very grim scenario in Pre Vaisnavite period. Spirituality looked wanting in religion and socio-political rivalry and opportunist purposes worsened the conditions of the people. This condition is called a low ebb in faith society, culture and prospect of a strong future nation. The greater Assam of Su-ka-pha was a blurred vision. Shankardeva and his neo vaisnavite movement provided a new lease of life to the people. The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement, started by Srimanta Shankardeva created an unprecedented zeal for the cultural and religious reformation in Assam in the 15th century. It is regarded as an epoch making phenomenon in the history of medieval Assam. Srimanta Shankardeva undertook two arduous pilgrimages. During the first pilgrimage the entire India was in the grip of **Bhakti** movement. Sankardeva have been deeply impressed by the nature and working of the neo-vaisnavite movement carried on by the sects of Ramanuja, Madhavacharya, Nimbaraka, and Ramananda in different parts of the country. His contemporary neo-vaisnavite saints were Ramananda, Kabir and Chaitnya. His **Eka-saran-nam-dharma**, with all its philosophy and doctrines as well as rituals and cult has contributed a lot to find out the true spirit to create a vibrant society based on peace, respect, goodwill and honesty. It initiated a new change in the socio- religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. The main motto of this movement is to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy.

The main objective of the study is to trace the resemblance of the different neo-vaisnavite aspects of Shankardeva like its doctrine, moral teaching, philosophy etc. to other vaisnavite saints, philosophers and exponent of Advaita philosophy of India, especially Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Kabir and Chaitnya.

KEYWORDS: Srimanta Shankardeva, Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Kabira, Chaitnya. **Eak-Saran-Nam-Dharma, Bhakti**

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I. INTRODUCTION:

A social reform movement was swept across India between the 12th and 15th century A.D. Bhakti movement based on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti or Devotion. Bhakti implies ardent love and devotion for God. it is always been regarded as the safest and surest path for the realization of God (Saharia, Prasanna, Das, Kailash ed.: 2006, p 425). Apart from religious sphere this movement also had its impact on the socio-economic and cultural life of the land. This wave had a deep impact on Sankardeva the great neo-vaishnavite saint of Assam ho began the propagation of neo-visnavism in the closing years of the 15th century. It is regarded as n epoch making phenomenon in the history of medieval Assam. Sankardeva undertook to arduous pilgrimages. During his first pilgrimage the entire India was in the grip of **Bhakti** movement. It is opined by the scholars that Sankardeva must have been deeply impressed by the nature and working of the neo-vaisnavite movement carried on by the sects of Ramanuja, Madhavacharya, Nimbaraka and Ramananda in different part of the country. His contemporary neo-vaishnavite saints were Ramanda, Kabir and Chaitnya. His religious beliefs are based on the **Bhagavad Puran**. Having greatly impressed by the simplicity and effectiveness of the idea of

Bhakti movement he evolved out a faith in Assam which is officially known as **Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma** having (Neog, Maheswar. :2008, p 156). A strict monotheism as the central doctrine and the recitation or remembering of the name of the one Deity as the principal form of worship. In the essential points, this faith has resemblances with the ideas of the faith of other vaishnavite saints of India. However, the faith clashes in certain aspects with the other neo-vaishnavite faith of the rest of the country.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The main objectives of the study is to trace the resemblance of the different neo-vaishnavite aspects of Sankardeva like its doctrines, moral teachings, philosophy etc. to other vaishnavite saints, philosophers and exponent of Advaita philosophy of India, especially Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Kabir and Chaitnya. Similarly the study also deals with what point's neo-vaishnavite faith propagated by Sankardeva differs from the faith of other vaishnavite Saints of India.

III. METHODOLOGY:

The paper is descriptive in nature, presented from the philosophical standpoint of view. The paper is based secondary data. Secondary data has been collected from relevant sources such as articles and periodicals published in reputed journals, books.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

A. Sankaracharya and Sankardeva:

Sankaracharya, the noted philosopher of Vedanta philosophy flourished in the eighth century A.D. being an exponent of Vedanta doctrine Sankaracharya threw ample light on the **Advaita** philosophy which had tremendously influenced the Bhakti cult before it spread as a movement in different parts of India. The philosophy established by Sankaracharya is known as **Advaita** Vedanta. It is a metaphysical philosophy system which believes in one reality only in the name of Brahma and thus it is absolute (Barua, Dr. Girish; 2011, p.178). Literal meaning of Advaita is non-dual. This Advaita is the ultimate reality which is not two. Absolute reality on the other hand is **nirguna** i.e. without any quality or attribute.

Sankardeva was born in Assam at a time when Assam went through a religious turmoil and anarchism. Sankardeva is not a metaphysician like Sankaracharya. He is basically a religious preacher i.e. guru having noble socio-religious reformatory designs through the preaching of his faith. He did not write any connotation or commentary on the Vedanta. On the other hand Sankaracharya was not a religious preacher. He was simply a philosopher with a talent logical sagacious. His entire philosophy is based on reasoning and he emphasized the **Jnana Marga** i.e. the path of knowledge or path of wisdom as enunciated by Upanishads. On the other hand Sankardeva advocates chiefly for the **Bhakti Marga** or the path of devotion or love. This is the highest **marga**. In this **marga** the devotee performs Karma pertaining to God only without thinking for a moment anything about the consequence, because his love and devotion to God becomes a part and parcel of him (Bezbaruah, Lakshminath: 1968, p.60). Sankardeva wrote emphatically in the first Chapter (Skandha) of

Bhagavad-Bhaktibihina jnana karma sabe byartha

(Choudhary, Medini: 2007, p.88)

According to him **Mukti** or liberation is not possible through knowledge. He firmly stood for devotion and told-

Jnanar pathat nahike sahai, kamar pathat bhay. (ibid. p.88)

B. Ramanuja and Sankardeva:

Ramanuja and Sankardeva, the great saint of south India and North-East India respectively who contributed greatly to the growth of Vaishnavism at two different periods of Indian history. Ramanuja appeared about three centuries earlier than **Sankardeva**. The socio-religious programmes of Sankardeva can be compared to the humanistic and reformatory zeal of Ramanuja in the 11th century. Both the saints believe in the worship of personal God and faith in saving the grace of that God. He told that God is perfect personally since. He contains all experience within Himself and dependent on nothing external to Him (opcit.Baruah, Dr. Girish, p.268.). Sankardeva too considers about the existence of one supreme Reality. He begins **Namprasanga** with allegiance to the Almighty who assumes form and is the cause of all incarnations. The same has been composed by the saint in **Kirtana Ghosa**—“**Prathame pranamo brahmarupi SanatanaSarva avatara karana narayana**” (Goswami, Narayan Chandra, ed: 1995, p.1)

According to Sankardeva the supreme lord is **Vasudeva Krsna** which is the embodied form Brahman. He is known by different names such as **Visnu, Narayana, Rama, Hari** etc.

Ramanuja supports the conception of ultimate reality from the scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads. Sankardeva drew the idea of his religious faith from the scripture like **Bhagavad Gita** which advocates the

supremacy of the cult of **kr̥ṣṇa**. In **Bhagavad Gita Kṛṣṇa** is identified with the supreme lord, the unity lies behind the manifold universe (opcit, Boruah, Dr. Girish: p. 268). Ramanuja's philosophy is called Visistadvaita as it insists on qualified non-dualism. However Sankardeva cannot be said to be Visistadvaitavadi like Ramanuja.

C. Sankardeva and Kabira:

One of the remarkable saints of north India of Sankardeva's time was Kabira (A.D. 1388-1568). He was perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of a poet saint like Sankardeva in the history of India. Both of them have proved themselves as philosopher, religious preachers and artists. Their philosophy was based on **advaita** vedantic though in reality were neo-vaishnavites. However Kabira's scope of work was not wider than that of **Sankardeva**. But both of them cherished the similar ideology and objectives in their propagation of neo-vaishnavism. Apparently both of them accepted **Nirguna Bhakti**. According to them absolute is Vishnu or **kr̥ṣṇa** or **rama**. He is the lord of the universe and the object of worship. They believe that salvation is possible only through devotion to the **Nirguna** God. If people worship Him with sincerely and selflessly they definitely attain salvation. They do not believe dualism or plurality of God. Thus in their worship of God, there is no place of idolatry. Instead, they emphasized upon the self realization through which one can understand His own nature. The same idea has been reflected on the writings of Sankardeva---

“Annadevi deva nakariba seva

Nakhaiba prasada tar/

Murtiko nasaiba tara grihe napasaiba

Bhakti haiba byabhisara./”

(Srimadbhagabat, Sampurna ed. 1969, p.44)

Do not worship any lesser Gods and Goddess nor even their temples; do not look at the idol and have Prasad; otherwise devotion will become impure.

Kabira also states in the same ways in his poem:

“Pahan puje hari milai ta me puja pahar

Tate iyah cakibhali pis khi sanskar”.

If you can attain God by worshipping a dead stone, why do not worship a hill. (opcit Baruh, Dr. Girish : 2011, p.287) Both saints share some remarkable similarities in the mode of initiation of their neo-vaishnavite faith. They emphasize on chanting (**Kirtana**) and listening (**Sravaṇa**) of the name of God. Kabira was a well known singer of devotional songs called **Bhajana**. Sankardeva composed noble devotional lyrics called **Bargeet** glorifying the different attributes of lord Krishna in its different incarnations and forms. Another important feature of the Vaisnavism propagated by the saints that it enrolled disciples from all caste and gave them equal status. Thus one will find some liberal elements based on the principles of equality in their respective faith propagated by the saints. The same ideology has been reflected in the writings of **Sankardeva**. He wrote-

“Nahi bhakatita jati ajati bisara

Kreishna bhakatira samastare adhikara”.

(opcit, Sahariya prasanna, Das, Kailash, p. 426)

According to **Sankardeva**, if a Chandala is devotee, superior to a Brahmin observing the various religious rites. In neo-vaishnavism **Sankardeva Brahmana**, **Kaibatra** and **sudras** can alike become disciples and they can sit together during congregations to repast on milk, fried rice (**Chira**), bananas etc. (Neog, Mahaswer: 1956, p.368) thus eradication of evils of untouchability, elevation of social status of the downtrodden were the main aims of Sankardeva. Sankardeva believe in the **jagat** exist in our mind, which has no external existence. But Kabira has not given any philosophical explanation of the concept of the world.

D. Sankardeva and Chaitnya:

Chaitnya (A.D. 1486-1533) was the most remarkable figure in the vaishnavism preached in Bengal. Vaishnavism in Assam had its full blossom at the time of birth of Chaitnya. Like the other vaishnavite saints of India Chaitnya too believed in one Supreme Being whom he called Krishna or Hari though he worshipped twin figure of **Radha-krishna**. Thus in this regard **Sankardeva** maintained a clear distinction from that of the belief of Chaitnya. It is noted that the idolization of the Female Element which formed a marked characteristic of Northern Vaishnavism and of Chaitnya's movement in Bengal, is conspicuously absent from Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. Chaitnya's concept of **Madhura-rasa** or love relation between the Lover and the Beloved as the mode of worship of God by His devotee to he gave prominence does not encouraged in **Sankardeva's** neo-vaishnavism. The **Eka-saran** faith prescribed by **Srimanta Sankardeva** offers prayer only to **Vishnu-kr̥ṣṇa** through His different incarnations.

In neo-vaishnavism of Sankardeva, the distinction between the devotee and the devoted God i.e. **Krishna** is of profound significance. Sankardeva always regarded himself as the servant of God. He was not **Krishna's** mistress of consort, nor his lover like Chaitnya.

V. CONCLUSION:

On the whole, it is seen that **Sankardeva's** concept of **Bhakti** and neo-vaisnavite faith has multifaceted contributions towards the morally demoralized and socially and politically disintegrated medieval land of Assam. Of course he has deeply influenced by the different thinkers, philosophers and saints who were the principal contribution or the growth and development of **Bhakti** Cult. On the basis of his experience gathered from these personalities and the study of scriptures especially **Bhagavad Purana**, Sankardeva propounded a faith of his own in the history of Assam i.e. **Eka-sarana-naam-dharma** which is unique in many respects and best suited to the indigenous people of the land. However it is a matter of concern that his name is rarely mentioned in the history of Indian Vaisnavism or **Bhakti** cult. But it is true that as a neo-vaisnavite saint, artist and above all as a humanist he indisputably one of the greatest India has produced. Undoubtedly name of **Sankardeva** deserves to be mention with Sankaracharya, Ramanyja, Ramananda, Kabira, Vallabhacharya, Chaitnya and Tulsidas.

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