



THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY IN ŚANKARDEVA'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT :

Srimanta Sankardeva, one of the greatest souls born on the soil of Assam, took upon himself the historic mission of strengthening the trembling base of the social life of Assam by forging unity among various races and various religious beliefs not by obliterating them but by harmonizing them. He induced all sections of people to come to the fold of religion of pure devotion. Such was the force behind the call of this great saint that raised new hopes in the hearts of all, irrespective of their caste, creed or social status, and within a few years of propagating His new faith Narottama of Nagas, Govinda of the Garos, Jayahari of the Bhutias and even Chānda Sāi of the Muslims embraced the pure monotheistic religion (Eka Śarana Dharma) of Śankardeva and sky of Assam was filled with the echo of the vibration of holy hymn that "divinity runs through the souls of all beings". This, in turn, facilitated the birth of a new national awareness in Assam. Śankardeva thus became the pioneer in creating a feeling of solidarity and integrity by wielding together the interests of all classes of people living in Assam. This can indeed be termed as the first cultural adventure aimed at creating an ideal atmosphere of love and mutual trust in society.

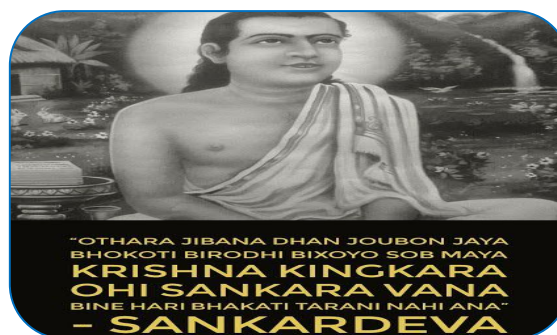
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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest sons born in the soil of Assam, Sankardeva, took upon himself the historic mission of strengthening the trembling base of the social life of Assam by forging unity among various races and various religious beliefs not by obliterating them but by harmonizing them. He induced all sections of people to come to the fold of religion of pure devotion as is revealed from his bold assertion:

"Kirā ta Kachāri khaci Gāro Miri
YavanaKankaGowālā
Asama MulukaRajakaTuraka
KuvacaMleccaCandāla"

It says, "And all others to associated Krsna devotees to be absolutely pure, with devotion true to escape miseries of life and to get into heaven sure". Such was the force behind the call of this great saint that raised new hopes in the hearts of all, irrespective of their caste, creed or social status, and within a few years of propagating His new faith Narottama of Nagas, Govinda of the Garos, Jayahari of the Bhutias and even Chānda Sāi of the Muslims embraced the pure monotheistic religion (Eka Śarana Dharma) of



Śankardeva and sky of Assam was filled with the echo of the vibration of holy hymn that "divinity runs through the souls of all beings". This, in turn, facilitated the birth of a new national awareness in Assam. Śankardeva thus became the pioneer in creating a feeling of solidarity and integrity by wielding together the interests of all classes of people living in Assam. This can indeed be termed as the first cultural adventure aimed at creating an ideal atmosphere of love and mutual trust in society.

The religion propagated by Śankardeva is known as EkaŚarana Bhagavati Dharma (i.e. Monotheistic Bhagavati religion). He elaborated the basic tenets of this new religion in a verse of four lines in Bhakti Pradipa:

"Despise not others faith
Be kind of all with a merciful heart
With soul unperturbed be tolerant to all faiths
This the spirit true of the pure religion of Bhagavata."

Religious tolerance and love for all is the basic teaching of His religion. These teachings conform with the teachings of specified dualism (Dvaitabada) of Rāmānujacāryya or pure-dualism of Visnuvāmī and Vallabhacāryya or dualistic-nondualistic philosophy of Nimbārkačāryya. Dualism and Non-dualism, in reality, do not involve any complex philosophy or dialectics. They are simply ways of looking at things or life. A person is a dualist till he believes that he is a distinct and separate entity and non-dualist if he believes that he is one and the same with others. In other words, a person who discovers Divine Immanence in every being is a true devotee, a true Vaisnava. The Gītā and the Bhāgavata also teach the same and so is the EkaŚarana religion of Sri Śankardeva. He wrote in Kīrtanaghosā:

"Dogs, outcastes, donkeys do have soul divine.
Know this and bow before them all
All things are but images of God
Bear this well in thy heart and soul.
One who perceives divinity in all
Suffers not from earthly miseries at all
As own self to love all beings
Is the best way to earn God's blessings."

In the Bhakti Pradipa he further said:

"I am immanent in soul of all beings
As true friend Godhead omniscient
Try to know this in thine heart
And escape the miseries of this earth."

In Daśama he becomes more explicit and writes:

"Without and within the universe
I am present as Divine Immanence
Know this secret in thy heart
And see me in all creatures of the earth."

Professor Rajanikanta Devasarma, in this context, rightly observed: "Being a monotheist or EkaŚarana becomes meaningless if one is not truly aware of Divine Immanence in all beings. The realisation that the God is the first principle, the ground and substance of all existence is the basis of Monotheism. Śri Śankardeva preached His EkaŚarna Nāma-Dharma (i.e. Monotheistic pure religion of chanting God's name) after gaining insight into this truth enunciated by the Upanisada, the Gītā and the Bhāgavata.

While religious intolerance is the principal cause of social disharmony and lack of cohesion, economic exploitation and political marginalisation are the supplementary causes. Śankardeva was very much aware of these twin problems and knew that no real unity and integration could be achieved until they are present in society. As a remedy to these problems, he started a unique adventure of establishing Satras and Nāmgharas. Undoubtedly these two were the greatest contributions of Śankardeva towards Assamese

culture. He displayed rare generosity and religious tolerance by using these two as means to rescue of Visnu temple to the open platform. At the same time, Sattras and Nāmgharas also proved to be two powerful instruments in eliminating the economic inequality prevailing in the society and in encouraging self-reliance and confidence among the people.

It is now more than four hundred and thirty years since the demise of the great saint. During this long period, society has passed through many upheavals and misfortunes and has changed beyond recognition. Yet Śankardeva's influence on society has remained unchanged. He is undoubtedly one of the greatest religious reformers born on earth. He knew the needs and aspirations of the people and accordingly, he got ideals before them and influences the Assamese society to the extent that people who followed or even tried to follow His ideals have become famous and venerable. Such people include contemporaries like Mādhavadeva, poet Ananta Kandalī, Rāmsaraswati and others, Bānikanta Kākati, Ambikāgiri Roychoudhury, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rābhā, Dimbeswar Neog, Maheswar Neog and others of modern times. It can boldly be asserted that in the present context, when our society is torn apart by disunity and disharmony hatred and racial disparity, religious tolerance and fanaticism; Śankardeva's teachings and ideals are still relevant, because they alone can purge the society from the growing evils. Śankardeva was not only a great religious teacher. He was the symbol of unity and integrity. The history of Assam's social unity and integrity can be said to have started with him. If there is single common platform to-day where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Assamese, Bengali and others can meet and sit together, it is the platform created by Śankardeva. This platform makes no distinction in terms of caste and creed, or high and low. It is a common platform of unity and cooperation where all are inspired to forsake all sorts of the narrowness of mind to embrace the supreme reality.

It is true that Śankardeva was born in Assam and he preached His religion in the great soil of Assam. But His teachings cannot have any geographical limitations because of the fact that they are promoted by the noble ideals of love for humanity. In His extensive writing, there is no mention of Assam; rather He used India at many places. Through His life and works, He demonstrated that one could be true Indian by being a good Assamese and conversely that being a true Indian does not stand in any way of being a good Assamese. Thus, through His teachings, he has always stressed the fundamental cultural unity of India in spite of political and other differences. His teachings and ideals are, therefore, relevant today, as they were in His time, in fostering unity and integrity not only of Assam but also of the whole of India.

Śrīmanta Śankardeva must have been convinced that such a performance could most effectively be used as a means of propagating the message of Bhakti and the principles of His EkaŚarana Nāma Dharma (i.e. complete submission to one supreme being through repeatedly pronouncing His name) among the diverse people of Kāmrupa-Assam of His time who were caught in the web of cults and faiths on top with rituals. Śrīmanta Śankardeva then took up to write plays with characters like Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, gods and goddesses, human beings and demons and asuras who would not only just appear but also talk elaborately and tease like they do in real life. While choosing the themes for His plays, Śrīmanta Śankardeva appears to have had two main considerations- the dramatic qualities of the theme in question and its potentialities for driving home to the audience the intended message. This would ensure the audience the expected entertainment while conveying to them at the same time principles of complete submissions to Kṛṣṇa; the God incarnate in human form. Śrīmanta Śankardeva believed that this would pave the way for achieving unity and brotherhood among the people, then divided in diverse groups and sects.

In view of times during which Śrīmanta Śankardeva planned and developed His theatre, one would not be justified to expect a realistic picture of society or social criticism or subtle study of character like in modern theatre. Śankardeva's aim was not to hold the mirror up to the society by holding its follies and foibles to ridicule. He, on the other hand, aimed at enlightening the unlettered folk in the teaching of Vaishnavism through the medium of drama, which could be profitably used to amuse and to teach at the same time. Social reform was, however, intended not through satirical portraiture or description but through showing the greatness of that one supreme before whose eyes all men and women were equal. The

playwright occasionally hinted, directly or indirectly, at social evils like polygamy, as we see in Pārijāta Harana where Krishna has to try hard to appease the jealous Satyabhāmā, one of His wife by fetching the Pārijāta flower from the garden of Indra. This Pārijāta episode also leads to the amusing quarrels between Sachī and Satyabhāmā, which comes down to such a low level that it appears to be more than hair-splitting between two rustic shrews. It is difficult to understand why Śankardeva chose to melodramatize the quarrel between these two princely female characters. It was that he wanted to portray a realistic enough picture of the quarrelsome women of the medieval time and also to provide an extra dose of entertainment to the viewers who were no doubt amused by such boisterous theatricalities.

Another interesting hint at the social or familial problem is found in Rukminī Harana where He wishes Rukminī's old father and king to give his daughter in marriage to Krishna are thrown to the wind by His young and arrogant eldest son, Rukma, who prefers His friend Śisupal instead for the hand of His sister. The uncomplaining meekness with the old king yield to the arrogance and haughtiness of His young son remains one of the universal helplessness of the older generation before the younger one. The portrayal of the characters of the lustful kings and princesses in Rukminī Harana and Śrī Rāma Vijaya is also full of satire and sarcasm through which the playwright exposes the hollowness of those in whose hands the responsibilities of ruling and leading people are vested.

The popularity of the theatre of Śankardeva soon spread far and wide. In the course of time, it made its entry into the royal places also. Ahom kings and nobles found the plays a welcome means of entertainment and began to invite Mahantas from Śankari Satras to perform plays in the royal places. For instance, it is mentioned in the TungkhurigiāBuranjithat at the invitation of King KamaleswarSimha the Mahantas of BaregharSatra presented the play Rukminī Harana (AD-1816) and another Satra called Nāmti Dihing Satra enacted a play titled Akrura-gamana. These are only some of the available records which, however, speak eloquently about ankiya plays being presented in the royal courts and places from time to time.

The plays of Śankardeva, Mādhavedeva and their followers continued to be performed and enjoyed with great enthusiasm as the major source of entertainment and education till the middle of the nineteenth century when the socio-political life of the people came under great strains on account of a number of factors. The continued invasion by the Burmese, the devastations caused by the foreign raiders and plunderers and subsequent loss of the country's long-cherished freedom caused havoc in all spheres of Assam's life and society. It is not difficult to visualise the fate of art, culture, drama and theatre under such extremely hostile circumstances. With the changes in the political scenario and subsequent changes in the socio-cultural life of the people, also affected, among other things, the practice of drama and theatre in the soil of Assam and among the Assamese.

Śankardeva visualized a society where all will be equal and where no man will repress another. He, however, realised that perfect translation of His noble dream into a reality would necessitate a radical change of the whole socio-economic infrastructure and that this was a task, which in the age of rising social classes, was altogether beyond His capacity. He, therefore, in emulation of the Buddha before, took a very pragmatic approach. Without trying to transform the whole society into a paradise of peace, he tried to establish, within the confines of the existing society, some safe heavens where the conditions of peace and equality could be fulfilled. This, he did by laying the foundation of the institution called Sattrā.

The Sattrā was the materialisation of Śankardeva's dream of a perfect society, the fulfilment of His quest for oneness and equality that, with rise of classes, had gradually begun to disappear. In it, he believed, His good and honest disciples could live in perfect peace and happiness, undisturbed by the din and bustle of worldly life. It may be noted in this connection that sattrā is a very old Sanskrit word mentioned even in the Rg Veda (7/33/13) and its etymological meaning is "that which protects the good and honest".

The sociological meaning of taking 'śarna' is going out of the material world of woes and impermanence to take shelter in the sattrā, the divide oasis of peace and quietude. The sattras were

modelled on egalitarian, nay communistic ideals. There was no division of rich and poor, no distinction of high and low castes, nor was there any system of private ownership of property.

The ritualistic simplicity of neo-visnavism was conditioned by the economic incumbency that Braminic rituals had made upon the common man. By the time Śankardeva appeared in the scene, the religious practices people had performed became highly expensive, requiring many materials (like milk, butter, honey, fruits, birds, animals, etc.) that the performance of these practices led many an ordinary folk to impoverishments. In agriculture-based society, animal sacrifices, in particular, had been, in the words of kosambi, "a much heavier drain upon production". The primitiveness of the transport system in those days made pilgrimages a very costly and hazardous affair.

The ritualistic simplicity of eka-Śarana-nām-dharma was the result of an effort to relieve man of such economic perdition in the name of religion.

"In bhakti there is no loss of money nor is there
Any bodily pain. Liberation can be had by simply
Bearing in mind the name of Krishna in any form one likes".
"knowth thou, in the discourse of Krishna there is
Neither monetary expense nor bodily labour."

The simplicity Śankardeva had introduced in His religion gave the poverty-stricken masses a great relief; it enabled them to seek spiritual solace easily and inexpensively. It was because of economic reasons again that Assamese ne-vaisnavism never encouraged the building of costly temples. Instead of temples, it has a network of nāmghars (village chapels, literally "house for chanting Harināma"), which are very simple in structure (usually a hall without walls with a room attached to it in which sacred things are kept). The nāmghar, found in almost every village of Assam, is a prayer hall, a community hall, a theatre hall and a village court all rolled into one.

In the teachings of Śankardeva it is found that he was the forerunner of giving more emphasis for economic value in the social life of the Assamese people through the development of small scale and cottage industries. He developed the values of various items bhāonā and jātrās. He highlighted the spirit of social as well as the spiritual integration. He established the 'samabhāva' and 'sāmyavāda' in the society.

Śankardeva developed a sense of non-violence, cooperation, tolerance and mutual understanding in the society enriching the cultural heritage of Assam and its people. A notable aspect of Śankardeva's ethic was ahimsā or non-violence. His sense of ahimsā was so strong that he asked people not to kill even flies, mosquitoes and ants, let alone an animal and men (Bhagabat-purana VI. V. 5286).

With the help of these teachings of Śankardeva, we have at present, see the values in His mass education. The method of recitation, memorisation, discussions, seminars, debate are the valuable and desirable means for education the mass people of Assam at that time. His 'Chinnayātrā' drama, which is the epitome of His philosophy and the skill of representation of eternal values- Truth, Goodness and beauty, the attributes of God. Thus it is seen that Śankardeva gave more emphasis on value orientation programme for moral and spiritual development. He said a deep faith in the common brotherhood of men is the recollection of the heart and development of human values. Thus value-based education is the actual force for the development of moral character. Śankardeva said that morality is the basis of personality. So morality and spiritually development person are desirable and valuable, such man can relate value with Absolute Reality.

Śankardeva's philosophy was a philosophy of life affirmation. He was not an ascetic monk but was a householder. He was not a flesh and blood bogging householder, but a national life worshiper. Life was for him a divinity. Every life is reverent for him. So, he made friendship with all creatures. Śankardeva tried to establish a society on the self-reliance of excellent health and hygienic equality.

It may be noted here that he was a pioneer of social justice, economic equality, universal brotherhood and women's liberation. Long before the dramatist Henry Ibsen, Śankardeva pronounced the necessity importance of women's liberation. In the Assamese sociological approach, they discover verity the fact that womenfolk take equal part in singing Kīrtana, bearing śravana in almost the kīrtanghar and

nāmghar, which resemble the free Christian churches. Śankardeva vehemently said for the emancipation of underprivileged who are an integral part of the society and women the half the sky. He said –

“Strisudrekareyadiāmāka bhakati,
tāhaka kahibo ito mahāmati”

He broke the barrier and granted admission for the women to entering His fold. He placed the womankind in great reverence. Ideal society in this century will give the right and respect to the womankind.

Śankardeva's real stand regarding woman is best reflected in His rendering of the Uttarākānda of the Rāmāyana. There he modified the original text in order to depict Śītā not simply as a docile housewife who ungrudgingly serves her husband, but as a woman having an identity of her own. Śankardeva's Śītā was not found to Rāmā's grave injustice toward her. Before entering the underworld (pātāla), she criticized Rāmā severely for abandoning her in a most injudicious manner. She flatly refused Rāmā's proposal of her being the queen of Ayodhya again and declared in an intrepid voice, "There would be no more shameless a woman that I if I shall ever call myself your wife".

Female identity is also echoed in His Rukminī-haran kāvyā and the drama under the same name, as also in pārijāt-haranāt. In Rukminī haran (both kāvyā and nāt) virgin Rukminī writes a secret letter to her lover kṛṣṇa at her own initiative and sent it vedanidhi, a Brahmin priest. In the letter she surrenders to the whim of His wife satyabhāmā who had nagged him to bring the pārijāt flower from heaven. Although Nārada called this complying attitude of kṛṣṇa that of a henpecked husband, the ultimately agreed with kṛṣṇa that "one should, of course, obey what one's wife dictates". In Hariśandra-Upakhāyan, Śankardeva spoke appreciating of the diverse qualities of woman, however only as of the wife of man:

“In time of work I regard you as a counsellor,
In sportive time you are my dearest mate.
In respect of mother,
At bed-time you serve me as a mind.”

Socialism sans spiritualism is classical nonsense. Śankardeva very deeply realised this truth, so he wanted to bring socialism with this spirit. So, he materialised His theory for social reconstruction based on spiritual socialism. The dream of His ideal society in this age of science and information technology is possible ushering in spiritual socialism. Without spiritual socialism, human society and civilisation has no future, has no hope. A society based only on materialism leads to corruption, and selfishness resulting in the emergence of total degeneration amongst humankind. So, it is the need of the hour to forge a society based on material and spiritual progress for the betterment and welfare of humanity in both words.

Notes:

1. “Eka deva ekaseva, Eka bīne naikeva” (Obscure Religious Practices among some Vaisnavas of Assam. by: Narendra Nath Dutta, p. 41, PustiPustak, 1st ed. Calcutta- 1990).
2. “Bhakti is mother, father, brother, and friend. It is the highest treasure. It is the movement (gati), the mental principle (mati), the god and the twice born (dwija). It is the faculty of mind and wealth. It possesses the germ of liberation. It is the solace of life and the vital breath of the body (prana). There is no other way of life save bhakti in this world and the next”, Bhagavati x. vv. 108668-70, by: SrimantaSankardeva.
3. “The world of Vedas are (as inviolable as those) written in stone. Knowing this, strengthen your mind. Leaving aside all other gods, pay obedience to Me and be contented”, Bhakti-Pradipa v. 134, by: SrimantaSankardeva.
4. “Tumesekevalasacasabemayamaya, Tomatesehantehowesrstisthitilaya”, Bhagavata, by: Srimanta Sankardeva.

5. "Tumi satya Brahma
tomataprakasejagatitoananta/Jagatatesadatumiseprakasaantaryamibhagabant//", Kirtana,
(vedastuti), by: SrimantaSankardeva
6. "Samastabhutaretumiachshrdayat/ Tattva napanitomakbicarobahirat/Tumisekebalesancamicha an/
Jani jnani ganehrdayatdhyanta//", Kirtana, by: SrimantaSanbkardeva
7. "PrathemapranamaBrahmarupisanatanaSarvaavatararakarnanarayana//", Kirtana, by
SrimantaSankardeva.
8. "Listen to the glory of the body I express: all the attributes of the world lie in the body itself",
Anadipatana v. 199, by: SrimantaSankardeva.
9. "Mukatitonisprhajitosehibhakatatanamorasamayimagoho bhakti,
Samastamastakamaninijabhakatarabaisyabhajohena deva jadupati", Nam-Ghosa, v. I, p. 5, by:
Madhavadeva.
10. "Sahitya Saurabha, by Pankaj Kumar Dhar, (2nd ed.-1997), p.31.
11. "In bhakti there is no loss of money nor is there any bodily pain. Liberation can had by simply bearing
in mind the name of Krsna in any from one likes", Bhagavat, x. v. 11780, by: SrimantaSankardeva.
12. "Knowth thou, in the discourse on Krsna there is neither monetary expense nor bodily labour", Ibid.
V. 10851.
13. "Kukkura-Chandalagardhabaroatma Ram Janiya sabakaparikaribapranam", Kirtan-Ghosa,
Sankardeva, editeb by: Tirtha Nath, verse- 1823, p. 441, 1st ed. 1989.