

Shri Shri Krishnāya Namō Namah
Jai Guru Sankara

Assam Vaisnavism and Sankaradeva Sangha

Sonaram Chutiya

Bhakti-mārga is too deep a subject to be discussed in a nutshell. *Mahāpurusiyā-dharma* (the religious system of Sankaradeva) is on the whole based on the bhakti cult. Max Mueller, the German scholar on the Vedic religion is of the view that “Prayer was the only offering during the Vedic age.” **Srimanta Sankaradeva**, the great preacher of Neo-Vaisnavism from Eastern India, in his image-like holy book, the *Kirttana*, makes a clear declaration that the religion of the bhakti cult is the only religion in the world, and it is the sum and substance of the four Vedas. Just as the sun-rays fall equally on everything on the earth, so also is the impact of the bhakti-mārga that helps both the wise and the ignorant equally. Universality is the most important characteristic of the bhakti-dharma:

Those who have ears, minds and mouths have equal rights in Krishna bhakti
- *Nimi Nava-Siddha Samvāda*, Sankaradeva

Now, the question arises - who is to be worshipped? The Supreme Soul, from which all individual souls spring up is Brahman, who is to be worshipped in the bhakti-dharma. **Sri Madhavadeva**, the chief disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva, says in the Assamese version of the *Bhakti-Ratnāvali*:

Bhakati-panthata eka deva Nārāyana

Only God Nārāyana is there in the bhakti-mārga.

The Veda, being the exponent of this *bhaktism*, declares:

ekam sat viprāh bahudhā vadanti
- **Rig-Veda**

The truth is One; the *vipras* give many a name to it.

And the *nirguna* Brahman, being highly compassionate for the living creatures, takes the shape of *saguna* **Krishna**, and the **Bhāgavata** confirms it by saying:

Krishnastu Bhagavān svayam

Krishna is God Himself

In the bhakti-mārga, God is the Savior Himself and He protects those who take shelter in the bhakti-mārga. The bhakti-movement may be called the result of the renaissance in India.

Although there are nine ways of bhakti or the worship of God, Srimanta Sankaradeva in his Assamese rendering of the Bhāgavata lays supreme importance on two of them, ie **sravana** and **kirttana**:

Although there are nine ways of Madhava's bhakti, of them sravana and kirttana are the chiefest.

In *arcana*, *vandana*, *dhyāna* and all others, God is not pleased so much as in the singing of His glories.

In the *eka-sarana-Harināma-dharma* of Srimanta Sankaradeva, only these two ways of worship, ie **sravana** (listening to God's glories) and **kirttana** (singing of the glories of God) have been made widely popular, and the practice of these two only has been the focal point of his religion.

It is to be noted that in the Neo-Vaisnavism of Srimanta Sankaradeva, there is no room for worship of Lord Krishna's image (idol) either in the community prayer house, known as the **Nām-Ghar** or in the private chapels of individual households. On the altar of God, known as the **Guru Āsana**, there is the decorated placement of the *Bhāgavata* or the *Gunamālā* of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The four other great books ie, the *Kirttana* and *Dasama* by Sankaradeva and the *Nām-Ghosā* and *Bhakti-Ratnāvali* by Madhavadeva are also placed on the Guru Āsana or the **thāpanā**, for worship. This is indeed a unique feature of the religion preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva, and it makes the system original in the true sense of the term.

Moreover, there is no room for the worship of Lord Krishna's consort Lakshmi or Rādhā along with Lord Krishna. It makes the Advaita Vedānta philosophy of Sankaradeva not only a mere theory, but a practical religious proposition. Perhaps no other system of Vaisnavism prevalent in India today can claim itself to be purely monotheistic except the *eka-sarana-Harināma-dharma* of Srimanta Sankaradeva. This is perhaps the main reason that led Sri Madhavadeva, the chief disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva, to claim for his Guru's supremacy in the theory and practice of the Advaita Vedānta philosophy among all the propagators of the Neo-Vaisnavite philosophy in India:

**Sankarese suddha mata Isvara bhaktira tattva
pracārilā sāstra-sāra jāni**

Sankaradeva alone preached the monotheism of God through a perfect understanding of the great religious texts.

And it is implied that other great preachers of India have failed to achieve the height and perfection of Neo-Vaisnavism in the strict adherence to the words of **Lord Krishna** in the **Gītā** and the **Bhāgavata**.

It is interesting to note that there has been a revival of Srimanta Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism in the mid-twentieth century through a great Vaisnava religious organization named **Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha**. It is but a natural result of the forces of unification and purification to be found in the *eka-sarana-Harināma-dharma* of Srimanta Sankaradeva. All the deviations and distortions that crept into the religious system of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva with the passage of time are being removed by the Sangha. There is an organizational network of the Sangha from the primary (**prāthamik**) units covering villages and towns leading pyramidically upwards to the **āncalik** (regional) units, the **jilā** (district) units and finally to the apex (state) level. The organizational heads of all the units are elected by the Vaisnava members for a term of 2 years. There is, therefore, no room for any greedy religious practices or for any form of distortion in the preaching of the religious tenets of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The persons elected for the units of the Sangha do not enjoy any special privileges, and they are one with all other members in matters of singing prayers, taking food or with respect to seating arrangements, etc.

There is no class and caste distinction in the platform of the Sangha. There is no meaningless practice in the wedding or *srāddha* ceremonies prescribed by the Sangha. In the socio-religious institutions too,

the monotheistic worship prescribed by Srimanta Sankaradeva has the supreme sway, thereby relieving the common man from social exploitation and unbearable economic burden, and also putting an end to the religious distortion of the Vaisnava faith. There has thus been a mass movement, heralded by the Sangha, which is true to the doctrines of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

[A recipient of the prestigious Srimanta Sankaradeva Award, Vaisnava Pandit Sonārām Chutiya is a leading scholar of Assam Vaisnavism . Author of a large number of books, monographs and articles on the Neo-Vaisnavite philosophy of Sankaradeva, he, through his writings, has waged a relentless crusade against the regressive societal forces. Shri Chutiya also held the office of padādhikār of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, the largest socio-religious organization in Assam.]