

The Lasting Values of Sankaradeva's Teachings

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The fifteenth century AD witnessed the birth of new ideas leading to the rise of new religions, founded on the liberal doctrine of *bhakti*, often of a revolutionary character such as India had witnessed in the sixth century BC. It was an era of great spiritual upsurge throughout India. It saw the rise of a great progressive and democratic movement which laid emphasis on the unity of Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith based on constant devotion, fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality of man. There appeared on the scene of religious history of various provinces a galaxy of spiritual leaders to carry the gospel of the new faith to the masses and to infuse in them a sense of unity and purpose. In Assam it was marked by the birth of the many-gifted Sankaradeva, an illustrious and noble son of Assam.

Sankaradeva, the fountain-head of the bhakti movement in Assam, left a deep impress on Assamese culture and literature, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a great genius prophet and seer, in whom the whole of Assamese culture may be said to be epitomized. With his encyclopedic knowledge, magnetic personality and brilliant power of exposition, he summed up in his long life of 120 years all that was good in the known past. Even after five centuries of his passing away, the essentials of his preaching are not only not exhausted, but are ever on the increase.

Sankaradeva was born in 1449 AD and lived on earth for a lifetime of 120 years. He lost his mother three days after his birth and was brought up by his grandmother. At the age of 23, he married a Kayastha girl, Suryavati, who died four years after her marriage leaving a girl. Sankaradeva lived in looking after the motherless girl and after her marriage and in his zeal for the faith he had discovered, he undertook an extensive tour which must have extended for a period of twelve years. During this sojourn, he visited places like Gaya, Puri, Vrindavana, Mathura, Dwaraka, Varahakunda, Ayodhya and Badarikasrama.

Even as a boy, Sankaradeva exhibited qualities of an erudite scholar. He was a prolific writer and had deep knowledge of the Vedas, the Vedanta, the Gita and the **Bhagavata-purana**. In order to give a permanent basis to his teachings he created a vast religious literature. The unique feature of his works is that he wrote all of them in the vernacular. He handled all branches of literature to fulfil the demands of the people. He was not only the author of works of original thinking, but was also an expert in translating from Sanskrit. He rendered into music, poetry and drama the entire life-story of **Krishna**. The result was the great output of literature in various branches of learning such as Kavya, theology, etc. As has been pointed out by Dr. BK Barua, "The writings of Sankaradeva had been, for the last few centuries, a source of delight, inspiration and wisdom to the Assamese people. He contributed a good deal to the development of the Assamese language, to the widening of the imaginative range of Assamese literature. He raised it to the classical elegance and richness by imparting into it what is good and beautiful in Sanskrit."

Before Sankaradeva's time, the religious life of Assam was far from satisfactory. It was an age of

tantricism which is characterised by the worship of the divine energy in the female form called by many names such as Kali, Durga, etc. It combined many elements of ancient superstitions as well as ingenious magic. Sankaradeva was not at all happy to find the general mentality of the people as hopelessly degraded, being selfish, eager for royal favour and averse to religion or culture. To put it differently, the atmosphere of Kamarupa was surcharged with worldliness. Thus the emendation of the prevalent religious and social abuses became Sankaradeva's first concern and consideration.

Sankaradeva was a monotheist and he preached a religion of supreme surrender to the One and, therefore, his creed is known as *eka-sarana nama-dharma*. In eka-sarana dharma, there is only one God, **Vasudeva Krsna**, and there is none else other than the One. The worship of other gods and goddesses are strictly prohibited. According to Sankaradeva, the Supreme God is **Krsna**, Who is the savior of all. Thus **Krsna** says in Bhakti-pradipa:

**Devote yourself to Me with a single mind.
Forsake from a distance all other gods.
Surrender yourself to Me alone.
Devote to Me, then will you be fit for salvation.
Never listen to the glorification of other gods
So that your devotion may remain unsullied.**

Sankaradeva is of the view that if Krsna is worshipped, all other gods are worshipped. So he says: "As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by pouring water only at the root of the tree, as limbs of the body are nourished by pouring food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Krsna". Sankaradeva upheld the philosophy of oneness in all. He comprehended one God, Krsna, one service, the service of Krsna, the Supreme Brahman.

This religion knew no caste, creed or color, and a universal spirit is the main principle of this faith. Sankaradeva knew that Brahmanical pretensions have raised a barrier between man and God, so both by pen and from the pulpit, he endeavored to break down all prejudices of caste, creed and rank. His teachings embrace the lowliest of the lowly. In Kirtana-ghosa, he says:

**Nāhi bhakatita jāti ajāti vicār
Krsnata bhakati samastare adhikār**

"In bhakti there is no distinction of castes, everybody has equal right to chant the Hari-nama". He simplified religion to such an extent that even the most ignorant and the humblest of all could join religious worship. *Mahapurusiya dharma* is another name for this faith, because Sankaradeva's object of worship, the all pervasive Parama Brahman, to Whom the devotee is to take shelter, is so described in the Bhagavata. It had universal appeal, and, therefore, people of all castes could embrace it.

It is as a social reformer that Sankaradeva stands out more prominently. In this respect, the message of Sankaradeva recalls to our mind some of the concepts of the modern period like Community Development, Adult Education and the Panchayati Raj. This naturally leads us to the closer examination of some of these concepts.

The term Community Development is used only to describe the methods by which the people who live in local villages or communities become involved in helping to improve their own economic and social conditions and thereby become effective groups in the programmes of national development. Writing about the precept and practice of Community Development, Mr Cousins observed that community

development goes forward on the assumption that the greatest resource of any developing country is its people, a position held by Sankaradeva also. It is distinguished also by the clear assumption that the basic unit of development will be the community. It is based, as well, upon recognition of the fact that the small community is one of the two social groups which are universal in human societies. Another distinctive characteristic of Community Development is that its methods and approach proceed from the principle basic to modern social work of helping people to help themselves.

Thus “the values upon which the community development rests are clear: A fundamental belief in the work of human being; respect for individual; a conviction that people can and should determine their own destinies; and a realisation that we should work to achieve these conditions in which each person will have the opportunity to develop his personality fully, thus enriching society”.

A deep and dispassionate study of Sankaradeva’s teachings reflects more or less the same ideals described above. It may be noted here that as every institution of society grows out of its own peculiar soil and nurtured by its own unique climate and environment, the ideal of the development of society as envisaged by Sankaradeva has its own distinctive characteristics. Sankaradeva attached great importance to dignity of labour and respect for individual. There are many anecdotes which amply testify to our statement. It was the ideal of Sankaradeva that one should not employ mean tactics to achieve one’s end. The following anecdote brings out the truth of the same in full measure.

It is said that a meat hawker once came up to the place of Sankaradeva’s disciples and offered meat for sale. On seeing the hawker, the bhaktas said that meat was taboo with them and asked him to go away. But the hawker requested them to purchase at least half a seer of meat so as to make provision for feeding his hungry children at home. On overhearing the conversation, Sankaradeva called the hawker to his side and said: “Dear child, it is not right and proper to eke out a living by killing animals however strained one may be. Earn your livelihood by some peaceful means. Give up this bad profession. Here I give you twenty-five rupees, take it, go home and purchase a pair of bullocks and other accessories and then take to ploughing”. Being pleased with the advice of the Master, the hawker bowed to him, took the money and left the place. On his way back, he thought about his profession in the new light. Being full of repentance, he threw away the basket of meat to the birds and resolved to give up his old profession and take up the new one. He returned to the Master once more, made a confession and desired to be initiated. This was done and the vendor became a devoted disciple. We can multiply such instances, but the space precludes us from further quoting.

Even the chanting of the Name of God had the same desire. Even to this day, one can see in the Sattras the *Hari prasangas* where people belonging to different castes join without any distinction of caste, creed or colour. This was intended mainly to establish harmony in society and to promote fellow-feeling.

Attending the prasangas at the appointed time and chanting the name of God to the accompaniment of musical instruments were intended to discipline the mind of the individual. Discipline is the great criterion which actually nurses determination and resolution which are in turn necessary to develop one’s own potentialities, thereby enriching society.

Sankaradeva knew that the development of society depended upon the education of the people and their active participation in matters affecting them most. His main concern was to mould the character and life of the people. This he achieved by drawing the attention of the multitudes to religious as well as ethical literature. He translated the Bhagavata and other Sanskrit texts into the Assamese language so that the common man might read and understand them. He also introduced one-act plays based on

religious themes to educate the ignorant. In his first drama Cihna-yatra, he himself painted on a large canvas, scenes of Vaikuntha to infuse into the minds of the people a sense of religious consciousness, on the one hand, and a sense of devoted service for the progress of humanity, on the other. Thus he used paintings as a popular means of communication that could be understood by the illiterate and even children.

To propagate his cult, Sankaradeva established the institution of *Sattras*. These *Sattras* contributed immensely to the socio-religious development of Assam. He also established the institution of *Namghars* – the central religious institution in the village which, as Dr B Kakati observes, “combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village school and a village church. These institutions served as sheet-anchors of Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances”. The *Namghars* “worked to a large extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village, and in the course of time, being nerve-centres of the village, came to co-ordinate all aspects of social, economical and political life of the Assamese people.....The *Namghars* further serve as panchayat-hall, where villagers gather to discuss and solve many of their day-to-day problems. These community centres have been found even to play political and religious role”. Indeed, these institutions performed the same functions of the Panchyats of which we hear so much today.

In summary, it can be said that never before in Assam, was a religion propagated by a single individual, which comprehends all the aspects of religion. At a time when people used to leap at tangent of anything non-material, Sankaradeva underlined the fact that human life has a spiritual fringe of its own and man can afford to ignore this fringe at his peril. On a passage of gloom, Sankaradeva’s message shone like the brilliance of a mid-day sun and here is light which has passed through the corridor of five centuries and still gives hope and inspiration to the common man in Assam.

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