

Mahapurush Sankaradeva

The Man and the Master

Shri Sudhansumohan Banerjee, I.A.A.S.

www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents an excellent article by Shri Sudhansumohan Banerjee, I.A.A.S, that had appeared in *The Calcutta Review* in 1951. Readers will note the background against which this article was written. It was in a period of great social and economic stress, of the Great War, of freedom and partition, of the mass-displacement of peoples and societies; but most importantly it was the product of a period when this “catastrophic lava flood” had also triggered off a great ideological crisis marked by “chaos and confusion” even in the religious, mental and moral “departments”. Mankind was frantically searching for new ideologies and there was taking place a great “revaluation of values”. And therefore, “whom shall we remember to-day in Assam but Mahapurusha Sankaradeva”. “For such an ideal where shall we go for inspiration but to Srimant Sankaradeva.”

It has been India’s great good fortune that there has been almost an unbroken line of master minds and spiritual guides who shaped her destiny for all time to come and saved through tumultuous ages her eternal heritage. We need not love India because we need cultivate the idolatry of geography but because she had felt and taught through her saints and seers from the Vedic Rishis to to-day’s Gandhi, Vivekananda, Rabindra, Aurobindo that Life is Truth, Truth is Life, that peace is not in negation or mechanical adjustment but in goodness in perfect union, in a life of disinterested activity dedicated to Him. In our haste to make the worst of life, let us not forget these fundamentals. And therefore whom shall we remember to-day in Assam but Mahapurusha Sankaradeva.

We live to-day in an age of inward as well as outward crisis and this catastrophic lava flood is bound to have its repercussion in every department of our life, mental, moral, social, political, religious and economic. In these days of storm and stress, chaos and confusion, we stand sorely in need of a great revaluation of values which we can only achieve if we study with reverence, questioning and service the messages and the great lives of the Masters before us. These great teachers are beacon lights to a storm-tossed world and let us in all humility take refuge in them. In these days of scientific and rationalist outlook on life we need not perhaps be dogmatic or pragmatic but the eternal values, the fundamentals are the same and do not change. These never die. These are ever existent. We must put our deeds in our creeds so that ideas and ideals might survive and in the continuum get momentum and re-orientation. And in the make up of these values it is the way of life that counts and not the particular

'ism' or creed which we preach from the house-tops. It is reverence that counts. We must sincerely ask ourselves what have we done to keep the torch burning.

In the inevitable collapse of creeds we need not be keen about sounding a new scheme of the universe, a new dogma of philosophy or policy but about teaching a new sense of duty as taught to us by the Masters, an inward change of heart, a system of self-culture which will not demand an evasion or ambiguity, which will reconcile the ideal with the real, satisfy our whole being, our critical intelligence as well as our aspiration, which will impart a gentle quality of equilibrium in our mental and spiritual make up and poise.

“Mankind to-day is in one of its rare moods of shifting its outlook. The mere compulsion of tradition has lost its force. It is our business not only to recreate and re-enact a vision of the world including those elements of reverence and order without which society lapses into riot but to pursue it with unflinching rationality.” There the great men come. Their messages have to be re-interpreted in our lives and re-accepted with reverence suitably adapted to the deeds and needs of a modern rational society. We should not forget the fundamental fact that whenever the dynamic harmony and organic rhythm of life had been missing, there had come the Lord or His Messenger. Whenever there has been a period of social upheaval and unsettlement in one of those incalculable moments when History stands at cross-roads or takes a major turn, a great man has risen to guide and protect us. Whenever the traditional forms are unable to express the growing sense of the Divine and the Human, the more sensitive insight into the right way of life, apostles of faith like Gandhiji or Sankaradeva come and give us a new lead. The whole history of Humanity bristles with such names. We may call them by whatever name we like – Avatars or great men or Nabi Rasuls. They are the pioneers and path-finders. Looking at the silent star-lit sky one can see with some effort in the dim distance of the galactic world one individual star and find a new world having its travail of birth and see that creation is athirst amidst the aeons of space. A man like **Sankaradeva** was like such an individual star creating a new world of ideas and ideals.

If we cannot to-day think of 'one world' of the 'Parliament of Man and Federation of the world,' we can at least in our conscious belief think of our land from the Cape Comorin to the snow-capped Himalayas, from the sea-swept **Dwaraka** to the hilly Parsuram. Our land is the land of great Rishis, seers and thinkers, of Vedas and Upanishadas of Ramayana and Mahabharata, of **Gita** and **Srimad Bhagabat**, of **Srikrishna** and **Ram**, of Gautama and Mahabira, of Kabira and Nanaka, Sankaracharya

and Shrichaitanya, of Gandhi and Tagore, of Arobindo and Vivekananda and last, not the least, of **Mahapurusha Sankaradeva** and **Madhabadeva** and a host of others.

India's splendid traditions hoary through ages are the joint inheritance of all of us. You and I are unwilling to lose even the smallest part of that inheritance. The teachings and history of our country, its arts, its culture and civilisation enriched as they have been through ages by contacts are my wealth and fortune and yours too. Our languages may be different, our manners and customs may be dissimilar but we have acted and re-acted on each other and drawn upon the same sources for inspiration and guidance, believed in the same fundamentals, drunk from the same fount of life. I therefore ask my friends in Assam in all humility – Do not keep your Sankaradeva cribbed, cabined and confined within the hills and dales and valleys and verdure of your fair land. He is ours. Put him on that great Indian pedestal which unquestionably is his. I do not deny that parochial patriotism is sometimes a necessity as a measure of self-defence but this culture tariff wall is needed up to a point. This thought is all the uppermost to-day when we stand face to face with a crisis of civilization. To use our great poet's metaphor, the Unvanquished Man has yet to win back his lost human heritage. The issue before us is not simply the creation of a national art or literature or a national Government but also to synthesise the vital social urges to create new values where spirit would not starve, plenty promised by science would percolate to the disinherited, lowly and the lost and toleration of all by all for all would be supreme. For such an ideal where shall we go for inspiration but to Srimant Sankaradeva.

So I hail Sankaradeva as my own as he is of Assam, not only as a saint, as a law-giver, as a poet, as a prophet, as a philosopher, a religious reformer, a spiritual dreamer, a God-intoxicated man of noble vision, but a master mind with an active idealism, with a spirit of service and synthesis. He is all these but he is above all these. We may take refuge in him. We may find solace in his words. At the same time I hail him also as a great Indian and one of those eternal expressions of the Cosmic Force in fulfilment of Lord's promise. And why? Envisage for a moment the social conditions of the land when Sankaradeva flourished. Born at Ali Pukhuri in the district of Nowgong in 1449 A.D. of Siromani Bhuya Kusumbar, he found around him a debased form of Tantrik worship which in defiance and disregard of the high philosophical truths inculcated therein had degenerated into a bloody cult of sensuous orgies, sacrifices, priestly witchcraft. Sankaradeva's biographer, Ramananda, gives a graphic description of these rites and rituals. Even till the other day we could hear of 'Ratokhowa', 'Bhogie' and 'Yoginisadhan'. Sankaradeva was above all a rationalist and he had the vision to see ahead of his time.

[...]

We who believe to-day in the Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha and Ahimsa, can we take exception to these doctrines when preached by one of our great men who like Gandhiji was a Mahapurusha not only in name but in thought, in deed and in action.

He was also not in favour of murti puja. His '**Eka Sarana Nama Dharma**' was an attempt to revive the pristine aspect of **Gita**'s philosophy of *complete self-surrender in Love*. God to Sankaradeva was above duality, above Purusha and Prakriti. '**There was none but One**' was his creed. He was the One and Immutable and the Universal in the shape of **Krishna**. To know Him, to realise Him you have only to adopt '*Nama*', '*Deva*', '*Guru*' and '*Bhakta*'. His Sadhana was not of Radha but of **Uddhaba**. He was the servant of the Lord.

He was a much travelled man and for years he had been on a pilgrimage throughout India, not once but twice. Bhakta Kabir was his friend. He met Shrichaitanya also at Puri. Two great men looked at each other and realised that each must go his own way to have his own conception of Sadhana. Shrichaitanya's cult of Vaishnavism was a different approach to the realisation of the Divine. It is possible however that Sankaradeva might have been influenced by Ramanuja and he had also adopted **Sridhar Swami**'s interpretation of Bhagabat but to him monotheism was an article of faith and he believed in no God but **God Krishna**. A story is told that when he was living at Patbausi, close to Barpeta, brahmins complained to king Nara Narayana that Sankaradeva was preaching religious democracy having no regard for Shastras, nor for distinction of castes. The king sent a garamali to arrest him. But he and his associates who were arrested were known as God's human form and they were released through intercession of Kamalapriya Devi and Chilarai. He himself recited a verse and the king was so impressed that he became his devotee. As a matter of fact king Nara Narayana of Cooch Behar was a great patron of literature. According to Darrang Bhasavali, Sankaradeva was entrusted with the translation of the entire **Bhagabata Purana** and preaching of the Bhakti cult just as Purushottam was entrusted with Ratnamala Vyakarana, Sridhar with Jyotisha and Ramsaraswati with the epics and Puranas.

Sankaradeva was not a religious reformer only but a social reformer as well. He practically founded the real Assamese Society. 'Satras' and 'Namghars' were real democratic institutions. There

was no caste distinction in the religious orders. Even Garos, Bhots, Muslims, tribals were equals with the highest class Brahmins. Sankaradeva proved in his life **Sukdeva's** tenet of a detached and unattached householder and showed that for spiritual salvation it was not necessary to be a sannyasin. He also prohibited use of intoxicants and narcotics. Apart from being a highly gifted spiritual leader, he was a literary giant as well. He introduced dramatic performances such as 'Ankiya Nat', 'Jatra' and 'Jhumur' and provided a real outlet of expression for the rustic mind. He had the prophetic eye to see that unless amusements which were based on real ethical values and religious traditions and deeply rooted to the soil were provided, ordinary lay and rustic people were likely to go astray. He was a great painter too. To add to his versatile genius he was a poet, a philosopher, a painter, a dramatist, a composer of songs and a great musician who could tune songs to different Ragas and Tals. His dramas such as Kaliyadaman, Patniprasad, Keligopal, Rukminiharan, Bargeets (songs), Bhattimas (psalms), his translation of the Bhagabat, his translation of Ramayana, his adoption of the Sanskrit rhymes and metres, his graceful style, his beautiful language particularly in Brajabuli, his deep erudition, his naive treatment of the subject, mark him out as one of the outstanding Vaishnava poets of the era and of the same calibre as Chandidas and Vidyapati. We should appreciate that Brajabuli interspersed with local dialects and Sanskrit was the accepted vehicle of all Vaishnava poets whether in Bengal or in Assam or in Mithila. Even as a Sanskrit poet his excellence is almost on a par with famous classical poets. It has the usual four elements, song, dance, dialogue and musical appliances. His works show a literary style and excellence of their own and a sense of universalism and equality unreached in many literatures of the same period.

So we see Sankaradeva as a rebel against orthodox practices, as a religious revivalist, as a social reformer, as a democratic leader, as a poet, as a philosopher, as a dramatist, as a monotheist, as a musician, as a composer and as a spiritual preceptor of a protestant type. Such a versatile man of outstanding abilities did not cut himself adrift from the main Indian current but re-established the same in its pristine glory through the process of congregational prayer known as "**Hari-prasanga**". He was a Martin Luther, a John Calvin or a Ram Mohan Roy or Dayananda Saraswati combined. He added to that a literary excellence and superb imagery. Such was the Great Man who was, so to say, the maker of modern Assam.

We should be failing in our duty if in our tribute of love and respect we fail to include his immediate disciple **Sri Madhabadeva** who was to him what Vivekananda was to Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa or Stalin to Lenin or St. Paul to Jesus Christ. He followed the master in every walk of life.

He was a deep religious man as well as a great literateur. His “**Nama Ghosa**” is the Bible of the believers. To do one’s duties dispassionately with pleasure and overcoming all obstacles was their great ideal - to be realised not in a maimed life of monastic seclusion but in an atmosphere of love and inspiration, in disinterested service and recital of the **Name of the Lord**. That ideal still holds good and every one of us can still be inspired by that great ideal. In the words of the English poet, we ask him: -

Bring me my bow of gold
Bring me my arrow of desire
Bring me my spear, and cloud unfold
Bring me my chariot of fire
I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we lit again the light
That shone in this benighted land.

[Article reproduced from *The Calcutta Review*, University of Calcutta; Vol. 120, Jul-Sept 1951, pp. 186-191]