

# EKA-SARANA (এক-শরণ) : ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF SANKARADEVA

Sonaram Chutiya

Tr. by Arunava Gupta

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[ATributeToSankaradeva.org](http://ATributeToSankaradeva.org) presents the English Translation of Vaisnavite scholar Sonaram Chutiya's 'SARANA' (শরণ). For the original paper in Assamese, click [here](#).

*Eka-Sarana, or Sole-Refuge to Krishna (God) - the path of Transcendental Devotion, is the main plank of Sankaradeva's creed, the pith and marrow of His religion, and we, at 'ATributeToSankaradeva.org' feel extremely proud and happy to present the English translation of three remarkable papers on this topic by the venerable Vaisnava scholar of Assam, Shri Sonaram Chutiya, former president of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha and also a recipient of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Award. For the other two papers, click below: -*

- [http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/eka\\_sarana\\_sarva\\_dharma\\_tyag\\_trans.pdf](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/eka_sarana_sarva_dharma_tyag_trans.pdf)
- [http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/bhakti\\_ratnakarara\\_adharat\\_eka\\_sarana\\_tattva\\_trans.pdf](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/bhakti_ratnakarara_adharat_eka_sarana_tattva_trans.pdf)

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It is admitted on all hands by scholars of religious literatures that in the evolution of Indian religious thought, the Vedas' is the most ancient phase. References to many gods and goddesses (deva-devis) are found in the Vedas. The names of Indra, Agni, Soma, Vayu, Surya, Mitra, Varuna, Visnu, Usha, the twin Asvins springing forth from Yama, Pusha, Rudra, Prajapati, Yama, Parjanya, Aryama, Marut, Brahmanaspati or Brihaspati, Saraswati, Aditi, Ila, the Adityas, Ribhu, Tvasta, Savita, Indrani, Varunani, Agneyi, the Vasus, Matarisva, Vaisvanara, Bharati and other gods and goddesses are found in the Vedas. The majority of these [gods] are conceptualized keeping in view the forces of material nature. On the other hand, a good number of hymns (mantras) are found that clearly declare such Vedic deva-devis to be thirty-three in number.

Again, it is in the Rig Veda that we find, in the long road of evolution of the Hindu religion, an attempt to establish a unity among all these [diverse] gods and goddesses. '*ekam sadvipra bahudha vadanti*'<sup>1</sup> - Paramesvara (God) is One, the learned attribute many a name [to Him]. On [the nature of this] monotheism, however, the scholars are not one in opinion. Some scholars interpret the different names of the gods and goddesses as being ascribed to a single Creator; others offer proof that these names are nothing but ascriptions to the multifarious feelings and sentiments in the realm of thought (psychology).

The composition of the Vedic mantras and their compilation were not done at the same time. German scholar Max Mueller has termed the period of the composition of the Vedas as 'chandakal' (metrical period) and the period of their compilation as 'mantrakal' (mantra period). In the 'chandakal', the mantras (hymns) were composed and at that time, **prayer was the only offering**. During the

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<sup>1</sup> "They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman. To what is One, sages give many a title they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan" (trans. Griffith).

‘mantrakal’, the mantras were classified and categorized and put in written form. Although the scholars are not in agreement with regard to the exact time of composition of the mantras, that the Vedic mantras had been composed pre 1500 BC, all agree.

Whatever the gods and goddesses might stand for, between man and deva-devis, only the relationship of ‘give and take’ is witnessed. The deva-devis are to give to the people wealth and well-being, a long life, sons and progeny and in exchange, the people are to give the deva-devis (sacrificial) offerings of soma-rasa – the ahuti – and are to pray to them in different metres, the stutis (hymns). The main idea behind this stuti, yaga and yagna, etc was that the deva-devis be satisfied so that they supply to men their objects of desire. To secure the destruction of enemies and, at most, for the wearing out of sin, these prayers were addressed.

But, in spite of their being steeped in kamana (desire), it is in these stutis that we find the germ of bhakti-vada (devotion). Again, in the stutis addressed to Varuna, primacy of devotion is seen. In these stutis, we find admission of guilt (pāpa), repentance and prayer for redemption from sin. According to Prof McDonnell, a faint strain of monotheism is present in these hymns to Varuna only. It is this monotheistic conception, which was in a highly diminutive state at the time of the Rig Veda, that grew to completion as the ‘One Brahman’ during the phase of the Upanishad.

The foundation of the Vaisnava religion is also found in the Rig Veda when Visnu is described as brhat sarira (massive bodied) or, in other words, ‘He Who has the entire jagata (creation) as His body’; or when He is prayed to as ‘pratyeti-ahvam’ or ‘the One Who comes when called by His devotee’.

To engage in warfare with and to terminate or subdue the many deities worshiped among the various communities of India was Indra’s main duty. Kali, Vritra; these were deities worshiped by the tribal people. In the period of the Rig Veda, Krishna was one prime enemy of Indra. Residing on the bank of the river Amsumati with an army of ten thousand soldiers, a chief personality was Krishna.

In the era of the Upanishads, belief in the One Brahman, to Him love, towards His service attraction, attainment of moksa (salvation); these are found in the hymns to Varuna in the Rig Veda. The flow of the Vedic worship associated with many gods and goddesses became thin in the time of the Upanishads. It is on account of this that Dr. Radhakrishnan has remarked, “The decay of the old Vedic worship is traceable to this low conception of many gods”.

The One Brahman determined in the Upanishads became the only object of knowledge: -

yato va imani bhutani jayante /  
yena jatani jivanti /  
yat prayantya abhasam bisasti /  
tadvijajnasasva tadbrahmeti /  
[Taittiriya, 1/3/1]

Or, from Whom all living beings arise, by Whose assistance all beings thus born remain, holding their lives, [and] to Whom, at the time of pralaya (dissolution), they return and enter, Him you try to especially understand; He only is Brahman.

This Brahman is Attributeless Entity; He is Nirguna. “Brahman ekamevamadvitiam /”. One moment He is realized as the creator, Isvara, God; the next, as the created, Hiranyagarbha.

There is talk of eternal life in the Vedic religion. While, on the contrary, the philosophers of the Upanishads realized that life, in reality, is short-lived and temporary. All the visible material objects of the creation were finite and subject to decay. Even the knowledge which is garnered by means of the senses is finite and destructible. Every object of the external, material world perceivable through the senses is short-lived and destructible. They [the Upanishadic philosophers] came to realize in the [spiritual] world beyond the senses, an Unchangeable Entity Which was the foundation of an Infinite Life, Infinite Joy and Eternal Truth. The moment this Unchangeable Entity was realized, the risi, with heart a-thrill, immediately burst forth into prayer: -

“asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrityurmamritam gamayeti / sa yadahasato ma sadgamayeti, mrityurva asat, sadamritam, mrityormamritam gamaya, amritam ma kurvityevaitadah; mrityormamritam gamayeti natra tirohitamibasti /”  
[Brihadaranyaka, 1/3/28]

Meaning – Lead me from unreality (a-sata) to Truth (Sata), lead me from darkness (tamasa) to Light (Jyoti), lead me from death (mrityu) to Immortality (Amritam). Lead me from a-sata to Sata. In this prayer (mantra), ‘a-sata’ means mrityu and ‘Sat’ means Amrita. In the prayer ‘lead me from darkness to Light’, the meaning of ‘darkness’ is mrityu and that of ‘Light’ is Amrita. That (prayer) in which is said, ‘Lead me from mrityu to Amrita’, there is no hidden meaning in that.

It is this intense desire for an Eternal Life that led the risi (seers; sages) of the Upanishads to become antarmukhi (inward-looking, ie., to focus on the soul) rather than bahirmukhi (out-ward looking, ie., focusing on the material world). Man, helpless and shelter-less since ages and vanquished time and again in the battle of life, is seeking shelter, help and an Infinite Life. The hint of Sarana or Refuge (asraya) is found in this Maha-Mantra (Great Prayer) of the Upanishads.

Looking at the Sarana sloka of the Gita, the Crown Jewel of the scriptures of Vaisnavism, also, an identity of thought with this Upanishadic mantra is observed: -

karpanyadosopahatasvabhavah prcchami tvam dharmasammudhacetah /  
yacchreyah syanniscitam bruhi tanme sisyaaste ‘ham sadhi mam tvam prapannam //’  
[Gita 2/7]

Meaning, “Afflicted by the dosa (weakness) of karpanya and confused at heart in the matter of [the right] path, I am asking Thee - the means by which my welfare will be brought about, regarding that means, please tell me decisively [I implore Thee], because I have [now] become the pupil (sisya) of Thee, therefore please impart Thy Teaching to this one taking Sole-Refuge in Thee (saranagata).

Accepting oneself as completely shelter-less (nirasraya), insubstantial (nihsattva), weak (nirbala) and devoid of intellect (nirbuddhi), the act of taking shelter (refuge) in body (kaya), mind (mana) and word (vakya), in Bhagavanta (God) Who is Supremely Powerful, of Infinite Might, the In-dweller of All and the Supreme Lord, is known as Sarana. There is the clear directive by Bhagavanta that **this Sarana must be Eka-Sarana** – “Mamekamsaranam vraja /” (Gita, 18/66).

Now, this Eka-Sarana may be taken either in the Nirguna (Attributeless) Brahman or in Saguna (With Attributes) Paramesvara. In this connection, it is found in the Gita: -

kleso ‘dhikatarastesamavyaktasaktacetasam /

avyakta hi gatirduhkham dehavadbhiravapyate //  
[Gita, 12/5]

Meaning, for those whose hearts are attached [the asaktacittas], the [worship of] Avyakta (The Unmanifested) or the Nirguna is more difficult, because it is only through [the suffering of] pain that the people having abhimana (pride) in body may obtain deliverance in Avyakta.

For the reason that the upasana (worship) of this Nirguna Brahma is more tortuous, there is the emergence of the Saguna form of God. The *Srimad-Bhagavata* only is the Supreme Instance of the elaboration of this Saguna [form of] God. Therefore, although a faint hint (abhasa) regarding this **Sarana Dharma** is given in the Vedas and the Upanishads, its Supreme Importance has been underscored only in the Gita *and the fullest and most complete development of Saguna Paramesvara has been attained in the Bhagavata.*

Regarding this Sarana, innumerable instances may be cited from the *Bhagavata*. The ones taking **Eka-Sarana** in Krishna – the *Eka-Saraniyas* - are exempt from the [repayment of the] ‘pancama’ or the ‘five debts’ mentioned in the smriti texts:-

devarsibhutaptanrnam pitnam na kinkaro nayamrni ca rajan /  
sarvatmana yah saranam saranyam gato Mukundam parihrtya karttam //  
[Bhagavata, 11/5/41]

The rendering of the above by **Sri Sankaradeva**: -

পিতৃ ভূত পতি দেৱ ঋষি সুহৃদৰ ।  
উপজিলে আসম্ভাৰ ঋণি হোৱে নৰ ॥  
হোমে দেৱ ঋণ সুজে তৰ্পণে ঋষিৰ ।  
বলিদানে ভূত শ্ৰাদ্ধ আদিয়ে পিতৃৰ ॥  
সমভাৱে সুহৃদ সৰৱ সুজে ঋণ ।  
এহিমতে ঋণী সদা ভকতি বিহীন ॥  
কায় বাক্য মনে কৰি নিশ্চয় যিজন ।  
মুকুন্দৰ চৰণত পশিল শৰণ ॥  
তাৰ ঋণ সুজা সৰে গৈল সমস্তৰে ।  
নকৰিয়ো ঋণী আৰ নুহি সিটো নৰে ॥

pitri bhuta pati deva risi suhridara /  
upajile āsambāra rini hove nara //  
home deva rina suje tarpane risira /  
balidāne bhuta srāddha ādiye pitrira //  
samabhāve suhrida savara suje rina /  
ehimate rini sadā bhakati bihina //  
kāya bākya mane kari niscaya yijana /  
Mukundara Caranata pasila Sarana //  
tāra rina sujā save goila samastare /  
nakariyo rini āra nuhi sito nare //

The manes, the masters of the bhutas (elements), the devas (deities; demi-gods), the risis and the suhridas (friends);

on taking birth a man falls in debt to these.

Through homas (kindling of the sacred fires), the debt to the deities is repaid, through tarpanas (oblations), the rishis',

through sacrifice, the elements' and through srāddhas etc, the fore-fathers'.

And through sama bhāva, the debt to the suhridas is repaid;

in this manner, the one who is bereft of devotion (bhakti) is perpetually in debt.

But the one who, resolving firmly in body (kaya), mind (mana) and speech (vakya),

takes **Sole-Refuge (Eka-Sarana)** at the **Feet of Mukunda**;

his debt to all these (five) entities is immediately repaid.

Even without performing any of these (five) rites, he is not indebted to them.

For the ones bereft of bhakti for Bhagavanta (God), the rules of homa, bali, srāddha, etc., are there; but for the saraniyās who have taken Eka-Sarana (Sole-Refuge) in God, these are meaningless. On the contrary, the devatās (demi-gods) themselves have termed as abominable those persons who seek the shelter of other gods instead of worshipping Bhagavanta: -

avismitam tam paripurnakamam  
svenaiva labhena samam prasantam /  
binopasarpatyaparam hi valisah  
svalangulenatitartti sindhum //  
[Bhagavata, 6/9/22]

The rendering of the above by **Sri Madhavadeva**: -

ব্ৰত হাৰিয়া যুদ্ধ যত দেৱগণ ।  
কৰন্ত কৃষ্ণক স্তুতি পশিয়া শৰণ ॥  
ৰাগ আদি শূন্য তুমি পৰম নিৰ্মল ।  
নাহি অহংকাৰ বিষয়ৰ কৌতুহল ॥  
নিজানন্দ লাভে পৰিপূৰ্ণ অতিশয় ।  
গুণৰ উপাধি পৰিচ্ছেদ নকৰয় ॥  
হেনয় নিৰ্গুণ তুমি পৰম ঈশ্বৰ ।  
মায়াৰ অধীন আমি দেৱতা অপৰ ॥  
তোমাক এৰিয়া লৱে আমাত শৰণ ।  
তাত পৰে নাহিকে পৰম অজ্ঞজন ॥  
যেন কোনোজনে কুকুৰৰ লাঞ্জে ধৰি ।  
যাইবাক ইচ্ছয় তাত সমুদ্ৰক তৰি ॥  
তাৰ কদাচিত নোহে সমুদ্ৰ তৰণ ।  
সেহিমতে লৈয়া অনীশ্বৰত শৰণ ॥

britrata hāriyā yuddha yata devagana /  
karanta Krishnaka stuti pasiyā Sarana //  
rāga ādi sunya tumi parama nirmala /  
nāhi ahamkāra bisayara koutuhala //  
nijānanda lābhe paripurna atisaya /  
gunara upādhi pariccheda nakaraya //  
henaya nirguna tumi Parama Isvara /  
māyāra adhina āmi devatā apara //  
tomāka eriyā lave āmāta Sarana /  
tāta pare nāhike parama ajnajana //  
yena konojane kukurara lānje dhari /  
yāibāka icchaya tāta samudraka tari //  
tāra kadācita nohe samudra tarana /  
sehimate loiyā anisvarata Sarana //

[...]

O Lord! Only the fools rely on the assistance of others leaving Thee. They who seek the shelter of other deities may only be compared with such persons as who harbor the wish of crossing the ocean by catching hold of the tail of a dog.

Regarding Sarana, the parama bhakta (great devotee) Akrura has stated: -

kah panditah tvadparam saranam samiyadbhakta priyad rtagirah suhrdah krtajnat /  
sarvan dadati suhrdo bhajato 'bhikama-natmanamapyupacayapacayo na yasya //

The rendering of the above by Sri Madhavadeva: -

কৃষ্ণক এৰিয়া কৰে আশ্ৰয় আনক ॥  
নাহি মুঢ়মতি আৰ তাহাৰ সমান ।  
অক্ৰূৰৰ বচনে লৈয়ো ইহাৰ প্ৰমাণ ॥  
বোলন্ত কৃষ্ণক এৰি তোমাৰ চৰণ ।  
কোননো পণ্ডিতে লৈবে আনত শৰণ ॥  
ভকতৰ সুহৃদ পৰম প্ৰিয়তম ।  
নাহিকে কৃতজ্ঞ সত্যবাদী তুমি সম ॥  
দিয়া ভকতক অভিমত কামচয় ।  
আপোনাকো দিয়া তুমি কিনো কৃপাময় ॥  
তথাপিতো হানি লাভ নাহিকে তোমাৰ ।  
অক্ৰূৰৰ বাক্যচয় কৰিলো সংহাৰ ॥

Krishnaka eriyā kare āsraya ānaka /  
nāhi mudhamati āra tāhāra samāna /  
Akrurara bacane loiyo ihāra pramāna //  
bolanta Krishnaka eri tomāra Carana /  
konano pandite loibe ānata Sarana //

bhakatara suhrida parama priyatama /  
nāhike kritajna satyabādi tumi sama //  
diyā bhakataka abhimata kāmacya /  
āponāko diyā tumi kino kripāmaya //  
tathāpito hāni lābha nāhike tomāra /  
Akrurara bākyacya karilo samhāra //

The one who, leaving Krishna, takes refuge in other deities,  
there is not a greater fool than such a person;  
Find its proof in the words of Akrura.

He says to Krishna, “[O Lord!] Leaving Thy Feet,  
which wise man (pandita) would go and take refuge in others!  
Thou Who art the bhaktas’ beloved, the Most Loved One,  
there is none as grateful and truthful as Thee!

Thou giveth [Thy devotee] Thy counsel and [fulfilleth] all [his] desire;  
Thou even giveth Thyself! O My Lord, there is none who can equal Thee in kindness!  
But, in spite of this [generosity of Thee], O Lord, Thou neither gaineth profit, nor suffereth any loss!”  
With this I conclude the words of Akrura.

That, apart from Isvara Krishna, there can be no other saranya deva (deity of refuge) is exemplified through hundreds of instances in the Bhagavata, e.g.: -

tapatrayena ‘bhihatasya ghore samtapyamanasya bhavadhvanisa /  
pasyami nahanyaccharanam tavanghrivandvatapatradamrtabhivarsat //  
[Bhagavata, 11/19/9]

The rendering of the above by Sri Madhavadeva: -

কেৱলে শৰণ্যদেৱ সঁশ্বৰ মাধৱ ।  
শুনিয়ে কৃষ্ণক যেন বুলিলা উদ্ধৱ ॥  
হে কৃষ্ণ ইটো ঘোৰ সংসাৰ পন্থত ।  
তিনি তাপে অতিশয় হুয়া আছে হত ॥  
তযু পাদ-পদম ছায়া ছত্ৰ বিনে তাৰ ।  
নাহিকে শৰণ আৰ তাপ এৰাইবাৰ ॥  
তোমাৰ চৰন-যুগ ছত্ৰ বিপৰীত ।  
ছায়া কৰি সৰ্বদিশে বৰিষে অমৃত ॥  
হোৱয় কৃতার্থ লৈলে তাহান্তে শৰণ ।  
এহিমনে সংহৰিলো উদ্ধৱ বচন ॥

kevale saranya-deva Isvara Mādhava /  
suniyo Krishnaka yena bulilā Uddhava //  
he Krishna ito ghora samsāra panthata /  
tini tāpe atisaya huyā āche hata //  
tayu pāda-padma cāyā chatra bine tāra /  
nāhike Sarana āra tāpa erāibāra //  
tomāra Carana-yuga chatra bipolarita /

chāyā kari sarbbadise barise amrita //  
hovaya kritārtha loile tākānte Sarana /  
ehimāne samharilo Uddhava bacana //  
[Madhavadeva, Ratnavali]

Lord Madhava is the One and Only Saranya-Deva (Deity of Refuge). Listen to what Uddhava said to Krishna, “Oh Krishna! I am (almost) killed in this dreadful path of the world being victimized by the three sorrows. I have no other shelter to escape from their attack save and except the shade of the umbrella of Thy Lotus Feet. Thy Feet are an umbrella so wonderful that they shower nectar while spreading shade on all sides. The one who takes shelter (Sarana) in Them achieves [Supreme] Accomplishment”. At this I conclude the word of Uddhava.

It is precisely for this reason that the Ultimate Instruction of the Gita is: -

sarva-dharman parityajya  
mam ekam saranam vraja  
aham tvam sarva-papebhyo  
moksayisyami ma sucah  
[Gita, 18.66]

গীতাত মাধবে কহিলন্ত অর্জুনত ।  
তজিয়োক সখি ধর্ম কর্ম তীর্থ ব্রত ॥  
কেবলে শরণ মোত লৈয়ো ধনঞ্জয় ।  
রাখিবো সরাতে মই নকরিবা ভয় ॥

Gitāta Mādhave kahilanta Arjunata /  
tyajiyoka sakhi dharmā karma tirtha brata //  
kevale Sarana mota loiyō Dhananjaya /  
rākhibo savāte mai nakaribā bhaya //

In the Gita, Madhava said to Arjuna,  
“Forsake, O Beloved Friend, all dharmas and karmas, tirthas and vratas [i.e., all rites and rituality].  
O Dhananjaya! Take refuge only in Me;  
I shalt keep (protect) Thee always, do not fear.”

Thus, the Eka-Sarana religion propagated by Mahapurusa Srimanta Sankaradeva; the roots of this dharma-vriksha (tree of religion) are very deep and it is supported by all the sastras of Hinduism. But, this strain of religion lay in a highly dispersed form in the scriptures; the Mahapurusa has, however, gathered together all these scattered gems and gifted them in an easily-accessible form to all, including woman and sudra, in their own mother tongue. Binding all peoples – the Garos, Bhots, the Yavanas and all others – with this single thread of harmony and by bringing down the barrage of **Hari-Nama**, he has gifted all the opportunity of resting in the shade of the dharma-vriksha that is Eka-Sarana:-



শ্ৰীমন্ত শংকৰ হৰি ভকতৰ  
জানা যেন কল্পতৰু ।  
তাহান্ত বিনায় নাই নাই নাই  
আমাৰ পৰম গুৰু ॥

**Srimanta Sankara Hari Bhakatara**  
**jānā yena kalpataru /**  
**tāhānta bināy nāi nāi nāi**  
**āmāra Parama Guru //**

Srimanta Sankara is, for the devotees of Hari,  
the wish-yielding tree (kalpataru) /  
Apart from Him, know it three times sure,  
we have no other Supreme Preceptor (Parama Guru) //

*[Source: - 'SARANA', 'Vaisnava Pandit Sonaram Chutiya Racanawali', Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 1998;  
Although we have tried our best to faithfully adhere to the original, we admit that it is impossible to convey the spirit  
of the original in the case of writings of this stature. As such, our translation is most imperfect and we seek forgiveness  
from all, including the author, for any lapse on our part – translator]*

[For a brief background, see [http://www.atributetosankaradeva.org/eka\\_sarana.htm](http://www.atributetosankaradeva.org/eka_sarana.htm)]

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