

An Approach to Assam Vaishnavism in the Light of the Upanishads

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It is an attempt to show in brief that Assam Vaishnavism of **Srimanta Sankaradeva** covers the main tenets of the major Upanishads and the teachings of the *Bhagavata-purana* and a few other Vedantic texts. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is said to be the essence of the Upanishads. In Assam Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva, the *Bhagavata-purana* has been acknowledged as the supreme scripture under various contexts:-

**cari veda astadasha purana yateka sastra
parama vedanta Bhagavata
Sanaka Sananda muni yoga jnana vicariya
uddharila tara sara-tattva
(Veda-stuti)**

The Bhagavata is the supreme Vedanta among the four Vedas, eighteen Puranas and other *sastras*. Sages Sanaka and Sananda in quest of yoga and knowledge discovered in it the essential truth.

**Samasta vedanta sara mahabhagavata sastra
(Nama-ghosa)**

The Bhagavata-sastra is the essence of all the Vedantas.

It is also called the crown jewel of all religious scriptures (*sarva sruti siro-ratna*). Besides the Bhagavata-purana, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva appear to have collected certain elements from certain other Puranas like Padma-purana, Vishnu-purana, etc.

The teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita have no less influence on the teachings and writings of the two great propounders of Assam Vaishnavism. **Madhavadeva**, the author of *Nama-ghosa*, has translated some of the verses of the Gita and written in praise of the Gita also:-

sarvopanisado gavo dogdha gopalanandanah,
partho vatsah sudhirbhokta dugdham gitamrtam mahat
(Gita-mahatmya)

**sakala upanisada dhenu / dogdha bhaila tana nandasuta
tara vatsa bhaila kuntisuta dhananjaya
dugdha bhaila maha gitamrita / Krisnara carane diya citta**

**subuddhi sakale santose pan karaya
(668, Nama-ghosa)**

All the Upanisads are, as it were, the cows, the milkman is **Lord Krishna**, the son of Nanda, and Dhananjaya, the son of Kunti, is the calf and the sacred Gita, the nectar-like milk and the noble devotees drink into their heart's content keeping their inmost being at the feet of Krishna.

The Gita is generally considered as the most popular and authoritative work among the Hindu scriptures. It is the product of triune Krishnas - the Lord as the speaker, the God incarnate Arjuna as the listener and another incarnate sage Vyasa, as the author of the Gita. Vyasa is known as the author of all the *Prasthanas* (the basic works on Hinduism) and this renowned sage of the Hindu scriptures was considered by some western scholars to be a name representing not one person but a collective name for a group of versatile writers of ancient Hinduism due to apparent anachronism and uncommon genius of this author of such vast literature.

The Bhagavad-Gita is placed in the *Mahabharata* in the seventh Parvan and was composed when a sanguinary war between seven akshauhini and eleven akshauhini troops was about to be waged. The extraordinary circumstances in which the Lord delivered the teachings of the Gita to His friend and disciple Arjuna may raise doubts in the minds of common men as to the authenticity of the Gita. But such doubts are blind to the character of knowledge proper and its process of spiritual communication. Vyasa, the author of the Gita, was not present in the war-field. Nevertheless, he was amply competent to recount, as did Sanjaya, everything going on in the battle ground of the holy Kurukshetra with the help of his spiritual insight. The Gita claims to embody the essence of all the Upanisadic teachings and is thus a superior *prasthana* of Hinduism and is indeed true Vedanta or the end of the Vedas.

The fundamental teachings and tenets of Assam Vaishnavism of **Sankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva** are in harmony with the Gita although *Bhagavata-purana* exercises greater influence on the teachings and thoughts of Assam Vaishnavism.

Vyasa was the author of both the Mahabharata and Bhagavata-purana which were the author's completion of spiritual progress. There need not be anything in the two works that lack in mutual harmony and coherence. The Gita shows the synthesis of *jnana* (knowledge), *karma* (deeds) and *bhakti* (devotion) as the fundamental art of life. But the Bhagavata-purana vindicates the priority and predominance of devotion over *jnana* and *karma*.

As a light of the lamp cannot be had in spite of having the lamp and the wick without the necessary oil, so also true knowledge dawns upon life, when knowledge and action rest fully upon one-pointed devotion.

Assam Vaishnavism is based upon absolute devotion to God with a spirit of self-abnegation so as to realize in the end that we live, move and have our being in and for God alone. Total surrender to God, absolute dedication to the service of God and His creatures, to feel the presence of God everywhere as the in-dwelling spirit, to see God in everything and everything in God, and to listen to and chant the Names and qualities of God with absolute devotion are some of the basic tenets of Assam Vaisnavism. Sankaradeva narrated in beautiful verses the *puranic* stories to establish the power of absolute devotion to God in his masterly work *Kirtana-ghosa*, and Madhavadeva expounded in beautiful verse-forms his spiritual experiences and the philosophical basis of the bhakti-cult in his great work *Nama-ghosa*.

Assam Vaishnavism or neo-Vaishnavism is a religion for the common man of this age. The

object of worship and devotion is **Krishna** Who is pure knowledge and consciousness, absolute truth and perfection; everything else is the product of *maya* as His act of sport. The qualities and Names of Krishna, the quality-less and formless, are beyond the three *gunas* of *maya* or *prakriti* and all the rest are subject to *maya*. This being so, Assam Vaishnavism solely relies on ***Nama-dharma*** and absolute surrender to and service of God and His created beings.

Madhavadeva incorporates many of the aphorisms of the Bhagavad-Gita into his Nama-ghosa and these are in consonance with the basic teachings of Assam Vaishnavism. The beauty of Madhavadeva's rendering into Assamese may be seen from the verses below:-

yasmat ksaramatito'ahamaksaradapi cottamah
ato'mi loke vede ca prathitah purusottamah
(Gita 15/18)

**ksara pade ito / dehaka bolay
aksara sabade brahma
duito kari Hari / uttama nimitte
prakhyata Purusottama
(Nama-ghosa, 171)**

The body is called the *ksara* (destructible), and *aksara* (eternal) means Brahman and **Hari**, being superior to both, is called **Purusottama** (the Highest or Supreme Person).

Again,

**ahmara nirmala bhakatita / duracaro tare kona citta
ahmaka bhajia candalo tare samsara
stri sudra vaisya adi yata / visayata matra sada rata
moka bhaji sukhe isave howe uddhara
(Nama-ghosa 610, Gita 9/32)**

Those who are of very low caste like the candalas and also those like the women, the vaisyas, the sudras, etc., if they surrender themselves at My feet, they also attain the supreme state of bliss.

**Mote matra sada diya mana / mor bhakta howa sarvaksana
moke puja moke matra kara namaskar
kahilo tomat satya vani / paiva sukhe moka mahamani
tumi priyatama suhrida sakhi ahmar
(Nama-ghosa 612; Gita 9/34)**

(Oh Arjuna) you being My dearest of friends, sakhi, and highly venerable, I tell you the truth. You concentrate your mind on Me, be My devotee, keep on worshipping Me (exclusively) and surrender yourself and bow down to Me and in the end, you will indeed attain Me at ease.

Similarly,

**rahasyaka jane yito loka / satate kirtana kare moka
dhari drirha vrata kari yatna viparita
Mora sarvottama dui pawe / kare namaskar bhaktibhawe
tara mora era eri nahi kadacita**

(Nama-ghosa 617; Gita 9/14)

He who, knowing the Secret, keeps on reciting My Names with great austerity and extreme endeavour and bows down at My purest Pair of Feet with earnest devotion, there can never be separation between him and Me.

It appears from the few verses quoted above that Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam embraces in its teachings and tenets the essences of the major Upanisads including the Bhagavad-Gita with a view to basing its religion on firm footing.

The Ultimate Being is Brahman who is devoid of form and qualities, but for the devotees He appears as Krishna or Vishnu bearing numerous names and forms and possessing infinite qualities. There are nine forms of devotion to propitiate the Godhead: -

**sravana kirtana / smarana Vishnura
arcana pada-sevana
dasya sakhitva / vandana Vishnuta
kariva deha arpana
(Kirtana-ghosa)**

You will listen, recite, keep in mind Vishnu and dedicate your body (to Him) with the feeling of servitude, friendship and prayer.

Further Sankaradeva writes in Veda Stuti: -

**asanta jagata khana tomata udbhava bhaila
santa hena prakase sadaya
karma jara manusyara mana magna bhaila tate
vedara nubuje abhipraya**

The unreal universe appeared from Thee and it manifests always as real. People, not understanding the aim of the Vedas and being devoid of consciousness, through restless activities, remain absorbed in it.

It is further mentioned under different contexts in 'Nama-ghosa' by Madhavadeva regarding the concept of God: -

Oh Krishna! Thou art alone form of eternal consciousness, truth and pure perfect knowledge. All the rest are the creation of *maya* by way of Thy sport (84).

Again,

Krishna is the only God who is destroyer of suffering, the Lord of Time and *maya* and there is no other deity superior to Him. He and none else is the cause of creation, preservation and destruction and know Vishnu to be the essence of the universe (586).

**Isvara iti ca brahmaiva, svashaktim prakritiya-
bhidheyamashritya lokan sristva pravishyantaryamitvena brahmadinam
buddhindriyantiantrivadiswarah
(Upanisad)**

What is called the Lord is Brahman Itself. With reliance on His own power Prakriti, He created the universe and remained immanent in it. He controls the intellect, the senses, etc. Thus He is the Lord of Brahman and others.

And what is Bhakti? '*Bhaktirasya bhajanam*' (Upani.) Absolute dedication to this (Lord of the Universe) is devotion. Madhavadeva writes just at the outset of the Nama-ghosa the nature of Neo-Vaishnavite bhakti (devotion): -

I crave for the satiating devotion and bow down to the devotee who is free from desire even for release. I adore the Lord of the Yadus who is under the sway of the devotees although He is, as it were, the gem at the head of everything else.

(Madhavadeva)

Madhavadeva argues further that God, the Lord, being unmanifest, formless and all-pervasive cannot be worshipped in any form and, therefore, the mind and our being must be purified by constantly reciting His Names with one-pointed devotion (8).

In '*Pasanda mardana*' (Kirtana-ghosa), Sankaradeva justifies the religion befitting this age. He quoted the words of sage **Shuka** to **King Parikshita**. The verses are as below: -

**kariya kirtana kalita ati
pawe Vaikunthaka cchatrisa jati
satya yuge kari dhyan samadhi
tretata samaste jajna aradhi
dvapare puji nana bhaktibhawe
kalita kirtane si gati pawe (3)**

The people of all thirty six classes in the age of Kali attain Vaikuntha only by whole hearted recitation of the Names of God. Whatever was achieved in the age of Truth through meditation and self-absorption, by means of all forms of sacrifices in the age of Treta and through worship with various forms of devotion in the age of Dvapara, the same can be achieved in the age of Kali only by reciting the Names (of God).

Madhavadeva offers in his Nama-ghosa further reasons in support of 'Nama-dharma' as the simplest and appropriate religion for the age of ours: -

How can there be any form of worship of God Who is all-pervasive but unmanifest? How can it be meditated upon God Who is formless? There is no other way than purifying the mind by recitation of **His Name** (8).

The purest of religions is recitation of the Names of God and every living being is fit for it. It is, therefore, the essence of all scriptures that Hari-Nama (Name of God) is superior to all religions (129). The duties enjoined for different castes are according to scriptural injunctions and one is fit to observe accordingly. But no such rule is there in recitation of Names and it is therefore the essence of all religions (130).

Bhaktya mamabhijanti yavan yascasmi tattvatah
tato mam tattvato jnatva vishate tadanantaram

(Gita)

Similarly,

**kevala bhakati purusaka tare
sahay kako nacawe
jnane karme tawe tarite napare
bhakati napawe yawe
(Nama-ghosa)**

Devotion (bhakti) alone saves a person without the aid of anything else. But jnana and karma cannot so long save a person as long as bhakti is not obtained.

So, absolute devotion and surrender to God (**eka-sarana**) and discharging the duties with a spirit of renunciation and complete detachment and chanting the Names of God is the best of religions in this age. Every created being is fit to observe it, because it does not rest on any exterior conditions.

The attitude of Assam Vaishnavism to all men and all beings is indeed very laudable, because it considers the universe as divine, and all its creatures equal: -

**kukkura candala gardavaro atma Ram
janiya savako pari kariva pranam
(Kirtana-ghosa)**

Even the souls of dogs, candalas and asses are verily God and with this idea in mind, they shall be respected (saluted).

This teaching is in accord with the following: -

isha vasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat
tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gridhah kasya sviddhanam
(Isha Upa.)

Also,

**Mattah parataram nanyat kincidasti Dhananjaya
(Gita 7/7)**

Oh Dhananjaya, there is nothing (in the universe) different from Me.

Such equality and equanimity towards all creatures enabled Assam Vaishnavism to attract people to embrace this religion and to become disciples of Sankaradeva irrespective of their castes, creeds, religions or colour:-

**brahmanar candalar nivicari kul
datat corat yena dristi eka tul
nicat sadhut yar bhaila eka jnan
tahakese pundit buliya sarvajan
(Kirtana-ghosa)**

He is to be called wise and all-knowing who does not find any distinction of caste between a Brahmin

and a candala, considers a giver and a thief equal and has equality of view upon the high and the low.

Sankaradeva was not only the founder of Assam Vaishnavism but he was far greater as a socio-cultural architect. For centuries past Neo-Vaishnavite literatures continue to be the model and life-blood of Assamese culture and literary heritage. The Vaishnavite Satras and the Namghars have become the religious and socio-cultural nerve-centres particularly in rural areas to unify the rural fold and to go ahead individually and collectively in an atmosphere of serenity.

Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva did not work only for the spiritual uplift of the people, but they also fully appreciated and contributed amply towards growth and development of the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people and the humanity at large. The Assamese Vaishnavite literature, rich and varied, unique in style and language, is made up of the comprehensive literary and artistic genius of the authors. The literary heritage of this age comprises prose, poetry, drama, songs, etc., with distinctive characters of their own. The holy songs traditionally said to be twelve score in number, called the Bargits (great songs or noble numbers) - indeed great works of art conspicuous by their composition, rhyme and melody with Vishnu-Krishna as their main theme - continue to attract all and are sung by the cowherds in the field, the boatmen in the river, and the young and old alike in the households. The bhaonas, Sutradhari dances, Satriya dances, etc., are types by themselves and are indeed symbolic in their own way, amply eloquent of the creative genius and spiritual wisdom of Sankaradeva and his host of worthy devotees.

Sankaradeva's neo-Vaishnavism like the Upanisads and the Gita emphasizes detachment (*niskama*) as the key to the individual and social welfare, healthy social relationship and attainment of the final goal (*paramartha*). The Gita emphatically states: -

vihaya kaman yah sarvan pumamshcarati nisprahah
nirmamo nirahamkarah sa santimadhighacchati (2/71)

One who gives up all desires and frees oneself from all cravings, attachments and egotism (pride) attains Supreme Bliss.

Again,

yada sarve pramucyante kama ye'sya hridi sritah
atha martyo'mrio bhavatyatra brahma samasnnute
(*Katha Upa.*)

When all the desires which abide in his heart are cast away, the mortal becomes immortal. Here he attains Brahman.

In the Nama-ghosa, Madhavadeva, following an aphorism of the Bhagavata-purana, writes in a beautiful verse which runs as below: -

**vairagyata pare bhagya / nahi provodhata pare
sukha aru nahi purusara
Hari vine paritrana / karta aru nahi jana
ripu nahi samsarata para (35)**

There is no greater merit other than detachment, no happiness greater than wisdom, no other

rescuer than Hari and no other enemy bitterer than world-mindedness for a man and know this for certain.

Detachment is means to success, because it leads to self-control, self-knowledge, firmness of conscience and viewing unity in things and beings.

vidyavinayasampanne brahmane gavi hastini
shuni caiva shvapake ca panditah samadarshinah
(Gita 5/18)

When wisdom is associated with modesty, the wise seers of unity in things consider a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a candala as equal.

Similarly,

**Vishnumaya dekhe yito samaste jagate
jiwantate mukuta howe acira kalate (41)
sakala pranika dekhibeke atmasama
upaya madhyata ito ati mukhyatama (42)
(Kirtana-ghosa)**

He who sees Vishnu everywhere in the universe attains release even when alive. You should look upon all living creatures as equal to your own self. This is indeed the highest of all means.

Sankaradeva's religion thus puts equal stress upon the highest of Upanisadic teachings. His religious teachings emphasize the basic moral code to weave out the way to emancipation from all mundane sufferings.

Assam Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva is (*eka-sarana*) *nama-dharma* derived mainly from the Bhagavata-purana; it is in accord with the essence of the Upanisads.

This religion is claimed to be simple but most effective and is indeed the most suitable and the only religion meant for the people of this age.

**Nama vine nahi kalita gati
kalira loka huive papamati
anyatra dharme nahi adhikara
janiba kalita namese sara
(Kirtana-ghosa)**

There is no way other than Nama in the Kali age, for the people of this age are evil-minded, and they are not fit for any other religion. Remember Nama (Name of God) to be essential in the age of Kali.

Again, on the authority of the Bhagavata (Chap.XII), it is further stated in the Kirtana-ghosa: -

**jnanato karmato kariya nara
Hari-kirtanata kara adara
dwadasa skandhata ehise kaila
tathapi murhara bodha nabhaila**

Oh man, prefer chanting of the Name of God to jnana (knowledge) and karma (action). The fools failed to understand this although only this fact was stated in the twelve chapters of the Bhagavata.

Bhagavad-Gita also finally said thus: -

Bhaktya mamabhijanati yavan yascasmi tattvatah (18/55)

Only by means of devotion, a man knows My pervasiveness and My essential nature.

Again, it is said: -

Bhaktya tvananyaya saktya ahamevamvidho'rjuna
jnatum drastumca tattvena pravestunca parantapa. (12/54)

Oh Arjuna, the highest of devotees, one is able to thus know, see and essentially get into Me only through one-pointed devotion.

What else can be greater self-surrender and devotion than: -

**dharmaka janoho mai / tathapi pravrtti nai
adharmato nivritti nohaya
hridi sthita huiya tumi / yena karavaha svami
Hrisikesa karivo tenaya
najanoho awahana / najanoho visarjana
puja mantra najano kincita
eteke Parameswara / dasa bhailo caranata
mora gati sathive ucita
(Nama-ghosa)**

I know virtue but I do not have desire for it, nor am I disinclined towards sins. O the Indweller! Therefore, remaining in my heart, Oh Lord, as Thou causest me to do shall I do so. I am ignorant of welcome or of bidding adieu or mantras and process of worship. Supreme Lord, therefore, I keep myself at Thy Feet as ever Thy servant and Thou shall ordain what is befitting for me.

[Dr. Kali Charan Das, formerly Professor and Head, Dept of Philosophy, Gauhati University. Article reproduced from *Sankaradeva : Studies in Culture*, First Edition 1978; Second Edition 1998, Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (ed), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Assam]