

Srimanta Sankaradeva and Nām Bhakti

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“Worthy of worship is the family and sacred is the land where are born true devotees of the Lord.” (*Saint Tukaram*)

Sri Sankaradeva, also called *Mahapurusa* by his disciples was a great Vaisnava saint of Assam. He was a contemporary of **Kabir**, **Guru Nanak** and **Chaitanya Mahaprabhu** and his teachings too breathe the same *Bhakti* spirit. The teachings of these saints are based on their respective ‘Anubhav’ i.e. the actual experience. They do not talk or say on the basis of the testimony and experience of others. The Mahapurusa, therefore, taught what he actually saw and experienced. Like all Realized Saints He felt that God is Love; and He can be attained in this *Kaliyuga* or Iron Age only through Devotion (*Bhakti*) and Love. All his writings, such as *Bhakti-ratnakara* (in Sanskrit), *Kirtana-ghosa*, *Bhakti-pradipa* (written in Kamarupi language) and *Bargits*, and those of his devoted disciple and spiritual successor **Madhavadeva**, speak of *Nām Bhakti*, i.e. worship of *Nām* as the most efficacious way for God realization.

There are a large number of verses in the *Nām-ghosa* of **Madhavadeva**, which say that love and devotion alone can captivate the Lord (verse 211) and that except *Bhakti* no other means such as knowledge, austerities can lead to the emancipation of man (verse 200). Madhavadeva, further elucidating the *Bhakti* aspect of Sri Sankara’s teachings, says that a devotee should bind with the rope of love the feet of **Krsna** to the pillars of his heart. He should wear a strong amulet of the *Ram Nam* and tightly fasten it to his neck (verse 258, *Nam-ghosa*). **Sri Sankaradeva** even throws a challenge when he puts a question like this to the earnest seekers of the Lord:-

**Is there anyone in this Kaliyuga who has attained salvation without treading
the path of *Bhakti* and without the love of Nam?**

(Verse 289 and 291 - *Nam-ghosa*)

Bhakti implies ardent love and devotion for the Lord. It has always been considered as the safest and sure path for God-realization. **Narada, Sanatkumara, Sandilya**, and all the well known seers of ancient time have stated most emphatically that nothing counts in the Court of Lord except love and devotion. **Narada** in his *Bhakti-sutra* goes to the extent to say, “Devotion to the Lord purifies men on the earth. It makes holy places holy, renders actions righteous and good and lends authority to scriptures.” Some of our important ancient *sastras* and scriptural texts too give a very high place to *Bhakti* as means to attain the goal of God realization. A number of sacred Books speak about God as the most Beautiful in the world, i.e. “Bhubana Sundara.”

The *Bhagavata-purana*, a classical treatise on the *Bhakti* thesis has inspired and will continue to inspire those who choose the path of love and devotion. The reply of the lovelorn gopis (cow-herd girls) to **Uddhava** who went to console and give them knowledge will ever ring in the ears of those who are infatuated with the love of the Lord. Those oft-repeated words are:-

There is no room left in our hearts for anything other than our Krsna. That Lord is in every pore of our body. When we walk or talk, when we are awake or asleep, we cannot forget, nor can we be away from the vision of our Lord for one moment. Uddhava, you have given us a very elevating discourse and we are extremely grateful to you. But we are helpless. Our minds and bodies are full of devotion to Him. An ocean cannot be contained in a pitcher and our eyes are now restless to see our Lord Krsna.

Lord Krsna in *Bhagavad-gita* says that of all paths, those who follow *Bhakti* would surely reach Him. Sir Edwin Arnold, who translated *Bhagavad-gita* in beautiful English poetry, quoting Lord Krsna in “The Song Celestial”, says:-

**Who follow gods go to their gods; who vow
Their souls to pitris go to pitris; minds
To evil bhuts given over sink to the bhuts;
And whoso loveth Me cometh to Me.
Whoso shall offer Me in Faith and Love**

**A leaf, a flower, a fruit, water poured forth,
That offering I accept, lovingly made
With pious will. Whatever thou doest, Prince!
Eating or sacrificing, giving gifts,
Praying or fasting, let it all be done
For Me, as Mine. So shalt thou free thyself
From Karmabandha, the chain which holdeth men.**

Adi Sankaracarya, an intellectual and spiritual prodigy, otherwise a known exponent of Jnana Marga, too, says that without devotion and love, path of knowledge alone could not bear any fruit. R.C. Zaehner analyzing the famous hymn of Sankaracarya's *Bhaja-govindam* concludes that it has a very sharp strain of *Bhakti*.

The teachings of the twelve **Alvars** and **Nayanars** of the south, particularly those of **Nammalvar** and **Andal**, long before the *Bhakti*-cult spread as a movement in different parts of India from the 12th to the 17th century, have pronounced *Bhakti* ethos. Love and Devotion, they all held, were the most potent means to reach the Lord and that is also evident from their writings.

It was, however, **Jayadeva**, the author of the sweetest lyrics known as '*Gita-govinda*', who became the real pioneer of *Bhakti* thought the middle ages. He not only sang the earthly and erotic love of Krsna and Radha, but sublimated it "to a mystic and spiritual plane". After him, **Vidyapati** and **Candidasa** added great spiritual fervor to that theme and sang the song of Divine Love of Radha-Krsna. Therefore in the course of the next three or four centuries there appeared a great galaxy of luminous stars who shone in the different parts of India radiating the light of *Bhakti*, giving rise in due course to a regular cult of *Bhakti*, of course, with varying shades here and there. **Namadeva**, **Eknatha**, **Tukaram** in Maharashtra, **Kabir** in Northern India, **Guru Nanak** and his nine spiritual successors in the Punjab, **Caitanya Mahaprabhu**, **Rupa** and **Sanatana** in Bengal form one single chain of this cult. **Sri Sankaradeva** and his devoted disciple **Madhavadeva** also are vital links of that very chain.

Madhavadeva in the *Nam-ghosa* says over and again that the central theme of the teachings of His master, **Sri Sankaradeva** is love of the Supreme Lord and His Name. This

Love, he further elucidates, could not be imbibed by the study of scripture alone, or by the worship of ordinary gods and goddesses like Brahma, Siva, Laksmi etc. This Divine Love, Sankara added, also does not awaken by one's own endeavours. It is through Lord's grace or the grace of the Guru or that of his preceptor that one gets this treasure of Divine Love. Luckiest indeed is the one who gets this Great Treasure.

Bhakti or Divine Love of which Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva talk in such superlative terms, in fact, begins when one, rising above the external and formal worship, starts searching the Lord from within and is prepared to put everything at stake. The path of *Bhakti* is not primrose path. One has to die while living and the devotee has to tread the path as sharp as that of the razor's edge. According to some, the Bhakta has to eat 'live coals'. Guru Nanak says at one place, "***If you are fond of playing the game of Love for the Lord, then come into His lane with your head on the palm of your hands***".

'Bhavana', the attitude of the devotee towards the Lord, plays a vital role in the path of devotion of *Bhakti*. In fact, the spiritual progress of a devotee mainly depends upon his bhavana. Undeviating faith in the Lord's love and His mercy and compassion further provide *terra firma* to a Bhakta. It is, therefore, that most of the great Vaisnava writers have said that '***Bhava itself is Bhagavanta***'. Srimanta Sankaradeva advocated the *Dasya-bhava* (of a servant) as opposed to *Vatsalya Bhava* (of a parent) and *Madhura bhava* (of a consort) of *Bhakti*. A *Bhakta*, Sankara held, should have "implicit sense of service to God, like a faithful servant, without hoping or asking for anything in return". The Radha-Krsna type of devotion i.e. the Madhura bhava as advocated by Jayadeva, in Bengal, had no attraction for Sankaradeva.

A real Bhakta or a devotee finds repose only in the presence of his beloved Lord or hearing His Name or His attributes; otherwise he is always feeling something missing. Whenever this repose of his is disturbed, he suffers acute pain, as beautifully expressed by lovelorn Mira in one of her popular songs:-

**Only the wounded know the anguished
When one is wounded sorely to the heart;
None but the Lord can save now!**

Sri Sankaradeva's *Kirtana-ghosa* and *Bargitas* paint the similar picture of a Bhakta's yearning to meet the Beloved Lord. There is only one beauty that infatuates him - that of the Lord; there is only one thirst that troubles him, that of *Harinama*; and there is only one hunger, that of meeting Him.

It is only when the intensity of Divine Love reaches such a pitch, Sri Sankaradeva says, that one gets what is called true devotion or real *Bhakti*. He calls it *Rasamayi Bhakti* because it has the sweetness of love and nectarine effect. The *Rasamayi Bhakti* according to *Chandogya Upanisad* 'is the sweetest of all *rasas*'. It is selfless and desireless and the Bhakta absorbed in this type of love does not seek any type of reward and worldly gain. He does not want even the *purusarthas* i.e. the four worldly gains such as *Kama*, *Artha*, *Dharma* and *Moksa*. **Guru Nanak** calls these four coveted things as *Char Padarth*, whereas Madhavadeva in the *Nam-ghosa* uses the word *Purusartha* for the same. What is relevant here is that a Bhakta, when engrossed deeply in the Lord's love, does not ask anything from his beloved Lord, not even salvation i.e. *Mukti*.

The *Rasamayi Bhakti* has a great transforming effect on a Bhakta. All the worldly attachments, desires and pleasures look insipid and tasteless to him. A devotee infatuated with passionate Divine Love; ordinary sense pleasures do not at all detract him from the path. His sensitive sense-organs like the eyes, ears and the tongue through which Mind and Maya play a great havoc, instead of standing in the way of God-realization, also undergo functional changes. The eyes find satiation only in seeing the glory and beauty of the Lord; and the tongue taste only in chanting *Harinama*, and singing the glory of **Hari**, **Madhava**, **Govinda**, **Rama-Krsna**. Similarly, the ear only wants to hear the Lord's praises or that of the Divine Name. It is after this type of transformation that a Bhakta, sitting, standing, sleeping or awake is ever with the Lord; and it is in that state that he rises above his body-consciousness and gains a complete mastery over his senses.

Thus it is through intense love and devotion i.e. *Rasamayi Bhakti* that a devotee gets full and spontaneous control over his senses, and eventually becomes master of his mind and of himself. It is then that he sees the effulgence of the Lord within and hears the Divine Melody or the Incarnate Word of God. The fire of *trnsna*, thereafter, does not burn him. Worldly attachments (*moha*) do not bind him to this unreal world and snares of *Maya* no

longer delude him. Sri Sankaradeva says that the **Eka-sarana devotee** really surrenders his self to the Lord or takes refuge at the Lotus Feet of the Lord.

The Worship of Nam

The essence of the teachings of Sri Sankaradeva as contained in his *Kirtana-ghosa*, *Bhakti-ratnakara*, and those of his spiritual successor, Madhavadeva, is devotion to **Harinama**. Sankara held the view that **Hari** becomes his who takes His **Name**. Madhavadeva in verses 704 and 709 of *Nam-ghosa* emphasizes the same point:-

**Worship Bhagavanta with devotion. Even the sinners get deliverance from sin
by taking the Divine Name. Do drink again and again the ambrosial sweetness of
Harinama.**

The Sikh scripture, i.e. the *Adi Granth*, too, repeatedly enjoins on the devotees on the worship of Nam. In *Rag-Gauri*, it is stated, “The essence of all faiths is contained in the Name of the Lord”.

Hari or **Rama**, **Krsna** or **Rama-Krsna**, **Govinda** or **Madhava**, **Mukunda**, **Murari**, **Narayana** by which Sri Sankaradeva addresses the Lord is the **Divine Name** Which, in fact, is the Incarnate Word, the Holy Spirit of God. In Sikh scriptures, the Gurus at certain places have referred to it as *Satnam (Sacha-Nam)* or *Adi-Nam*. It is this Divine Name which enables a man to lose his identity and become one with the Lord. The touch of this creative power of Nama alone takes away all the duality of man by making him as pure as the Lord Himself.

The Divine Name or Nama, the worship of Which is recommended by Sankara, is the vital power itself. In Sikh scriptures, it is stated that Nam pervades all the worlds. It is thus the Reality and the End of all devotional endeavour. In fact those who merge in the Divine Name find absolutely no difference between the Name and the Named. “He who worships Nama,” say the saints of *Bhakti* cult, “realizes the Named One”.

The Nama which is the manifested power of the Lord dwells nowhere except in the heart of a devotee. *Nam-ghosa* corroborates it by saying that

Within the heart is the storehouse of Nama
(Verse 993)

Nama, Sri Sankaradeva further says, is beyond the three attributes or *gunas*, i.e. *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. So long as one is under the spell of these attributes - whether they are of beneficial nature or otherwise, Sankara's disciple Madhavadeva writes, they are only causes of bondage (Verse 212, *Nam-ghosa*). The Name of Lord alone, he says, is beyond the three *gunas* and helps the spiritual aspirant in crossing the ocean of this world which is nothing but the eternal play of these three *gunas*. At another place, it is said that Nam alone is "beyond attributes", the Unsullied One (754).

The Nam, according to Sri Sankaradeva, is Niranjana (The Unstained One). Mind becomes clean only by hearing the sweet melody of the Lord ringing all the time within the deep recesses of the heart of man. So long as one does not rise above the world of sense and matter, one can never get this Niranjana Nam. **Guru Nanak** says, unless one vacates the body by leaving all the nine outlets of the body (i.e. unless one practices control of sense), one cannot attune oneself to that Divine Melody or the Word of God. Sri Sankaradeva also stresses the same point. Nam is Caitanya i.e. pure consciousness and body, mind, matter are all inert things; and unless one, through the chanting of Holy Names of the Lord or singing the praises of the Lord in the company of virtuous persons or Saints (i.e. Kirtana), rises above the body's consciousness, one can never get this most precious gift of Nama and take refuge at the red "Lotus feet of the Lord."

The grace of the **Guru** is also necessary for attaining this highest goal in the path of *Bhakti*. It has been emphasized by Sri Sankaradeva in his teachings. In a number of verses (132, 193, 235, 254, 257 etc.) of *Nam-ghosa*, Sankara's successor, Madhavadeva stresses the importance of Guru in the worship of **Nam**. In one of these verses he says,

**Without the help of the Guru who impacts the Name on the individual, there is
no other way to approach Hari (235)**

This Divine Name, acquired through the Guru's grace, says Sri Sankaradeva, is the sovereign cure for all the maladies of the world. It makes man immaculate and eternal. The worship of Nama, therefore, it is said, gives man immortality, and purifies him of all the dirt of his sins. In almost all the *Bhakti* scriptures including those of the Sikhs, i.e. *Adi Granth*, the Divine Name or the Eternal Word is described as *Amrta* i.e Nectar or *Maharasa* i.e. Divine Ambrosia, the partaking of which makes one free from the cycle of birth and death.

There are a number of verses in the *Nam-ghosa* which refer to Nama as “the sweet nectar” (Verse 654), “the nectar ocean” (Verse 236), “nectar of Ramanama” (237), “nectar-ocean of Harinama” (248), “Sweet extract of Harinama” (371), “the river of nectar” (372). In *Adi Granth*, in *Siri Rag*, it is said, “The Name of the Lord is Nectar. Quench your thirst with it”. Similarly, in *Rag Ram Kali* it is stated that the “Nectar is the Treasure of Nam; a devotee finds it.” In *Rag Kanara*, Nam is referred to as “Nectar sweet” and in *Rag Majh*, “sweet is the taste of the nectar Nam.” Kabir and Bhikha also refer to it and say that every heart is overflowing with this Nectar. No one is without it. Both Sri Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva say that Harinama can redeem even the *candalas*, the ‘low’ castes and ‘low’ tribes including the Garos, Bhutias and the Muslims.

Nam Bhakti, according to Sri Sankaradeva, bestows on a devotee *sahaja-ananda*, i.e., it gives eternal bliss, joy and equanimity. It is also through this type of worship that one can conquer the fear of death (Verses 45 to 48, *Nam-ghosa*). *Nam Bhakti* alone can tear the bonds of *karma* (Verse 504) whether these are *sancita karmas* or *prarabdha karmas* or *kriyamana karmas*. The worship of Nama also washes off all the sins of man thereby saving him from “the suffering of eighty four hells” (Verse 46). In verse 289 of the *Nam-ghosa*, it is said:-

How can the foolish one who having been born in Kaliyuga and does not love singing the Name of Hari, attain his salvation (i.e. find freedom from the vicious cycle of birth and death) in any other way.

At another place Sri Madhavadeva exhorts:-

Listen, O clever Saints, go on singing the Name of Hari. In Kaliyuga, there is no other way of being saved than taking the Name of Hari.

(Verse 267)

In the Iron Age, all the Vaisnava Saints say that it is the worship of the 'Eternal Word' which can save a devotee. *Adi Granth* also corroborates this very point, and one of the hymns of *Rag Basant* reads as follows:-

**The Iron Age has dawned
Sow the seeds of Lord's Name
This season is not propitious for
any other crop.
Do not be deluded by any doubt.**

Madhavadeva, in verses 251 and 341 of *Nam-ghosa*, says:-

**In the forest of virtues, the *Name of Madhava* roars with great pride like a lion.
Hearing his roars, the elephants of great sin, trembling with fear, take to flight.**

Kabir also talks in the same strain when, in one of his songs, he writes:-

**If there is a gramme of the Nam
in the heart and a thousand
grammes of sin.
Half a gramme of Nam in the heart
burns all sins to ashes.
By repeating the Nam, the dark
spots of desires are washed away.
Just as a spark burns up a hay-stack,
By repeating the Name, the snares
of mind and Maya burned;
In a moment all the dualities of
this world vanish.**

Sri Sankaradeva, therefore, like **Kabir** and **Guru Nanak**, repeatedly exhorts his disciples that in this world of matter and sense, full of sin and suffering, if there is anything that can save them, it is *Nam-Bhakti*. **Madhavadeva** even goes to the extent to say that

All religions have their abode in Harinama.

(Verse 429, *Nam-ghosa*)

Adi Granth (page 296) also says the same thing - “The essence of all faiths is contained in the Name of the Lord”. The earnest seeker, therefore, Sri Sankaradeva says, should not waste a single breath of his life; and devote himself only to “the worship of Harinama.”

Nama or worship of the Eternal Word alone can give repose. It can lead a man from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to Light and from death to Deathlessness. In brief, he who “utters the Lord’s Name fulfils the objects of his life”.

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