

Srimanta Sankaradeva and His Vedantic Leanings

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Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.), the great saint and leader of a socio-cultural and religious renaissance in medieval Assam in the North Eastern part of India did not propound a separate system of philosophy, but, evidently, based his religious teachings on the fundamental principles of the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy. Within the fold of the Vedanta, there are various schools of thought. It is interesting to find that while making use of the teachings of the Vedanta for his own purpose, he agrees and disagrees as well with the various Vedantic schools, and in reality makes a specific contribution of his own to Indian philosophy.

Broadly by the word ‘**Vedanta**’, we understand Ancient Indian literature of three stages: *Srutiprasthana*, *Nyayaprasthana* and *Smritiprasthana*. The *Srutiprasthana* covers some of the revealed texts (*srutis*) and chiefly the **Upanisads**. The fundamental ideas of the Vedanta appear here mostly in the poetic visions and mystic intuitions of the enlightened seers. The Upanisads are the Vedanta (End of the Vedas) in the sense that they appear at the last stage of the Vedic literature. They are studied after other Vedic texts and thus the Upanisads mark the culmination of the Vedic speculation. The celebrated scripture ***Srimad-bhagavad-gita*** which is said to be the gist of the Upanisads represents the *Smritiprasthana* of the Vedanta.

The problems discussed and solutions offered in different Upanisads of various Vedic schools (*sakhas*) showed differences in spite of a unity of general outlook. So the need was felt in course of time for systematizing the Vedantic views in order to bring out the harmony underlying them. **Badarayana** took this initiative in his famous ***Brahmasutra*** (also known as the *Vedantasutra*, *Sarirakasutra*, *Sariraka-mimamsa* and *Uttaramimamsa*) which represents the *Nyayaprasthana* of the Vedanta. Here is what we mean by Vedanta Philosophy.

The *sutras* of Badarayana are very brief and hence are subject to different interpretations. Various commentaries came to be written to elaborate the doctrines of the Vedanta. The author of each of the leading commentaries (*bhasya*) became the founder of a particular Vedantic School. Thus we have the school of absolute monism (*Advaita Vedanta* or *Kevaladvaitavada*) of **Sankaracaryya**, the school of qualified monism (*Visistadvaitavada*) of **Ramanuja** (11th century A.D.), the school of identity in difference (*Bhedabhedavada* or *Dvaitadvaitavada*) of **Nimbarka** (11th century A.D.), the school of Dualism (*Dvaitavada* or *Svatantrasvatantravada*) of **Madhvacarya** (15th century A.D.), the school of unthinkable identity in difference (*Acintyabheda-bhedavada*) of **Sricaitanya** (16th century A.D.), the school of pure monism (*Suddhadvaitavada*) of **Vallabhacarya** (16th century A.D.). Of these schools, the schools of Sankara and Ramanuja are most known and leading.

A study of the works of Srimanta Sankaradeva reveals that the Vaisnava saint of Assam agrees and disagrees as well with the aforesaid leading Vedantic thinkers, Sankaracaryya and Ramanujacaryya. This leads to a long continued discord among the critics with regard to Sankaradeva's Vedantic outlook. While some scholars stamp him as a follower of Sankara's Advaitavada, some again find in him an adherent of Ramanuja in respect of his Visistadvaitavada. Without any specific reference to the earlier views on the subject here, we propose to take a fresh look at Srimanta Sankaradeva's philosophical vision and to examine the areas of agreement and disagreement between Sankaradeva and the two Vedantic theorists, Sankaracarya and Ramanujacarya.

Both Sankaracaryya and Ramanujacaryya assert the Upanisadic view that 'All is Brahman' (*sarvam khalu idam brahma*) and therefore, believe in one Absolute, Independent Reality pervading the world of multiple selves and objects. But they differ in their views regarding the nature of this Absolute Reality and its relation with the world and selves. While we find Sankaradeva as believer in the Absolute Reality (Brahman), we find him also agreeing and disagreeing with both the Acaryyas in many a point.

According to Acaryya Sankara, the Brahman is to be known only as the Attributeless, devoid of all specifications¹. But Acaryya Ramanuja understands from the word Brahman directly the **Purusottama**², free from all defects and possessed of innumerable benevolent qualities. The Godhood (**Isvara**) of Sankara is not an Absolute Reality as he asserts that Isvara exists so long as the Ignorance (*avidya*) pervades³. To Srimanta Sankaradeva, both Brahman and Isvara are Absolute Truths. Though he does not take Isvara in the denoted sense of the word Brahman, he accepts the same entity, his **Madhava (Krsna), Bhagavanta** and **Paramatma**, differentiating at the same time amongst the three on the basis of distinctive characteristics⁴ (based on different angles of vision). Thus in respect of his concept of Brahman as well as of Isvara we do not find

¹ samastavisesarahitam nirvikalpakameva brahma pratipattavyam na tadviparitam - *Brahmasutra Sankarabhasyam* - BSB, 3.2.11

समस्तविशेषरहितं निर्विकल्पकमेव ब्रह्म प्रतिपत्तव्यम् न तद्विपरीतम्

² brahmasabdena svabhavato nirastanikhiladoso'navadhika
tisayasamkhyeyakalyana gunaganah purusottamo'bhidhiyate. *Sribhasyam* - SB, 1.1.1

³ evamavidyaktanamarupopadhyanurodhisvaro bhavati, vyomeva
ghatakarakadyupadhyanurodhi;

tadevamavidyatmakopadhiparicchedapeksamevesvarasyesvaratvam sarvajnatvam
sarvasaktivam ca, na paramarthato vidyaya apastasarvopadhisvarupe atmani
isitrisitavyasarvajnatvadi vyavahara upapadyate - BSB, 2.1.14

एवमविद्याकृतनामरूपोपाध्यनुरोधीश्वरो भवति, व्योमेव घटकरकाद्युपाध्यनुरोधि;

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तदेवमविद्यात्मकोपाधिपरिच्छेदापेक्षमेवेश्वरस्येश्वरत्वं सर्वज्ञत्वं सर्वशक्तित्वं च, न परमार्थतो विद्यया
अपास्तसर्वोपाधिस्वरूपे आत्मनि ईशित्रीशितव्यसर्वज्ञत्वादिव्यवहार उपपद्यते

⁴ pravartānta yekhane indriya samastaka /
Paramātmā volaya tekhane Mādhavaka //
samādhita vekata hovanta guche bhrama /
tekhane volaya jānā Mādhavaka Brahma //
karanta yekhane ito srsti sthiti anta /
tekhane volaya Mādhavaka Bhagavanta //
Brahma Paramātmā Bhagavanta eka tattva /
ekerese tini nāma laksana bhedata //

Srimanta Sankaradeva being completely identical in view with either Sankara or Ramanuja.

According to *Kevaladvaitavadin* Sankara, the world is unreal, Brahman being the only reality⁵. According to *Visistadvaitavadin* Ramanuja, like Brahman the world is also real⁶. Srimanta Sankaradeva, in unambiguous terms, declares the world as unreal, Brahman being the reality to him⁷. But in this unreal world, Sankaradeva sees also the reality as he views the personal God embodied in all the living beings and things of the world⁸. Here also he shows his differences from both Sankara and Ramanuja.

According to Sankaracaryya, the individual self (*jiva*) is no other than Brahman itself⁹. Ramanuja states that the individual self is only a part of the Brahman¹⁰. Sankaradeva does not believe in basic difference between Godhood and the individual self¹¹. But in the scheme of worship advocated by Sankaradeva, i.e. in the path of devotion, for all practical purposes, a difference between the Lord and the devotee must exist¹². In this context also, we do not find Sankaradeva behaving completely like either of the two Acaryyas.

⁵ **Brahma satyam jagannmithya** - *Brahmajnanavalimala*

⁶ **Brahma savisesam ... tadvibhutibhutam jagadapi paramarthikameva** - SB, 1.1.1

⁷ **tumi satya Brahma michā jagata-srajanā**
- *Bhagavata*, X (*Bhagavata-purana*, Assamese rendering by Srimanta Sankaradeva)

⁸ **jatajivajangama/ kitapatangama/ aga naga jaga Teri kāyā /**
- *Bargit* (Sankaradeva), No. 4

⁹ **jivo brahmaiva naparah/** - *Brahmajnanavalimala*

¹⁰ **jivo' yam brahmanomsa itybhypagantavyah** (SB, 2.3.42)
jvaparayorapi svarupaikyam dehatmanoriva na sambhavati (ibid 1.1.1)

¹¹ **Isvarata kari jiva bhinna nuhi**
sānta avikāri haya /
bhrāntiye ajnāna āvarita huyā
āponāka najānaya //
- *Bhakti-ratnākara*, 773

¹² **yadyāpi tomāta kari jiva nohe bhinna /**

Like Brahman, *Maya* (illusion) is also a fundamental Upanisadic concept inherited by the Vedantic philosophers, yet they differ from each other in its treatment. While Sankaracaryya equates *Maya* with *avidya* and *Prakriti*¹³, and considers it as unreal, Ramanuja rejects Sankara's notion of *Maya* and accepts it as an absolute truth. Srimanta Sankaradeva deals with *Maya* more as Sankara does¹⁴. All the three, however, are one in accepting *Maya* as the potent energy of the Personal God (*sagunabrahma* or *Isvara*). But to Sankaracaryya, *Maya*, the creative power which is no other than *Prakriti* is not a permanent character of God, as Ramanuja thinks, but only a free will which can be given up at will. In this context, Sankaradeva seems to endorse the view of Sankara¹⁵.

tathāpito bhaila Prabhu tomāra adhina //
- *Bhagavata*, X

tomāra bhrtiyara / bhrtiyaro bhrtiyara
tāra bhrtiya bhailo āmi /

moka Jagannātha / nakarā anātha
nerivā Mādhava svāmi // - NNS 308-9

¹³ avidyatmika hi sa bijasaktiravyaktasabdanirddesya paramesvarasraya mayamayi mahasusuptih
yasyam svarupapratibodharahitah serate samsarino jivah / - *BSB*, 1.4.3; *ibid* 2.1.14

अविद्यात्मिका हि सा बीजशक्तिरव्यक्तशब्दनिर्देश्या परमेश्वराश्रया मायामयी महासुषुप्तिः, यस्यां
स्वरूपप्रतिबोधरहिताः शेरते संसारिणो जीवाः;

¹⁴ avastuka dekhāvaya vastuka āvari /
ehise mohora māyā jānā nista kari //
nāthākito dekhi yena candramā dutaya /
thākito rāhuka keho nedekhaya //
ehi mate māyā āra kari Isvaraka /
asāra visaya tāka dekhāve jivaka //
- *Bhagavata*, II, 650-51

¹⁵ srsti karivāka Isvarara icchā kāja /
Purusara parā mahāmāyā bhailā bāja //
anādirupini Isvarara ardhakāya
vyakta bhailā mahāmāyā srstika icchāya //
- *Anādi-pātana* (AP)

tumi satya Brahma michā jagata srajanā /
tomāra māyāye kare tomāta kalpanā //

praktita āche mātra vyavahāra dharma /
tumisi svarupa paripurna Param-Brahma //
- *Bhagavata*, *Kuruksetra*

From the practical standpoint (*Vyavaharikadrsti*) of Kevaladvaitavadins, Brahma comes to be viewed as the cause, the creator, the sustainer and destroyer of the world and also as the omnipotent and omniscient Being. Here is the *Saguna Brahma*, the object of worship. (This, however, is also resultant of avidya). To Sankaradeva also there is the Lord, no other than Saguna Brahma Who happens to be the cause, the creator, the sustainer, the destroyer, the omnipotent and omniscient Being¹⁶.

As viewed by Ramanujacaryya, the Brahman has two parts - the *acit* (matter) and the *cit* (soul). He is full of distinctions (*bheda*) of various types¹⁷. Unlike Ramanuja, Srimanta Sankaradeva believes in the Brahman devoid of all distinctions¹⁸. It must be maintained that in viewing Godhood, world and selves, Sri Sankaradeva maintains two standpoints, transcendental and practical. So all the distinctions, practically perceived, are attributed to the operation of Maya.

In Kevaladvaitavada, the bondage is the erroneous identification of the soul with the body. But in the Visistadvaitavada, the bondage is due to *Karma* (deed). In his views,

¹⁶ **namo Nārāyana jagata-kārana
khandiyo samsāra-bhaya**
- *Kirttana*, v. 641

**bibhanjiyā āponāka Prabhu Nārāyana
srajilā indriya yata bhuta-prāna-mana // etc**
- *NNS*, v. 109, 299, 113

**srastāro srastā tumi sarva-drastā
uddhāri dharilā bhumi /**
- *Kirttana*, v. 1438

¹⁷ **sarvada cidacidavastusarirasya parasya brahmano' ... - SB, 1.4.23;
evam ... cidacidvastusariradekasmad evadvitīyat ... ibid 1.4.27**

¹⁸ **māyātese dekhaya bibidha pariccheda /
svarupata tomara nāhike kichu bheda //**
- *Kirttana*, v. 215

**nitya niranjana svaprakāsa ātmā eka /
māyā upādhira pade dekhiya aneka //**
- *Bhagavata*, X, *Kuruksetra*, v. 511

Sankaradeva seems to make a synthesis of the two views. According to him, while the bondage is due to karma, karma is the result of ignorance¹⁹.

According to Kevaladvaitavadin Sankara, Liberation (*moksa* or *mukti*) is the disappearance of the illusory distinction between the soul and the Brahman owing to the emergence of the Knowledge of identity and is attainable during one's lifetime²⁰. But according to Ramanuja, liberation is the Brahma *prakaraprapti* (obtaining the state similar to the Brahman) by the devotee after death due to the grace of the Lord. In the scheme of Sankaradeva who follows Sankara on the issue, liberation in the form of disappearance of distinction between the soul and the Brahman is attainable *even in one's life time*²¹.

The Vedantic account of creation is to be understood in the sense of evolution of the world out of Brahman through Its power of Maya. Following scriptures, both Sankara and Sankaradeva have referred to this Maya as Prakriti²². From Sankara's exposition²³, it is clear that this is not the Prakriti of *Sankhya*, an independent reality; it is a power of God and absolutely dependent on Him. Now, in the treatment of Maya, the difference

¹⁹ sarirara sange jiva bhunje bisayaka /
ātma buli māne māyāmaya sariraka //
dhare mahāmohe āti hove jnāna-sunya /
sakāme aneka karma kare pāpa-punya //
sehi karmaphala bhunji bhrame samsārata /
nāhi anta jivara yātanā-dukha yata //
- NSS, vv. 110-11

²⁰ mithyajnanapayasca brahmatmaikya-vijnanadbhavati. brahmabhavasa moksa - BSB, 1.1.4
brahmatmatavagamadeva sarvaklesa-prahanat. - purusarthasiddheh. ibid

²¹ ahamkāra gucile brahmaka jiva dekhā //
māyā edi āpuni buddhira gucai bhrama /
nirmala hrdaye jiva dekhe Parabrahma //
yi kālāte jnāna-astra chede ahamkāra /
chinde karmabandha jive teve āponāra //
dehako nedekhe jiva huyā brahmamaya /
- Bhagavata, XII, vv. 177-79

²² sarvajnasyesvarasya māyāsaktih praktiriti ca srutismrtyorabhilapyete - BSB, 2.1.14;
Bhagavata, Kuruksetra, 486-488

²³ BSB, 1.4.3 and Sankarabhasya on Svetasvatara, 4.5 and 4.11

between Kevaladvaitavadin Sankara and Visistadvaitavadin Ramanuja, is that while, according to Ramanuja, the matter (Prakriti) which is an integral part of God (in his view) really undergoes modification, Sankara holds that God does not undergo any real change; the change is only apparent, not real. Illusory modification of any substance, as of the rope into the snake is called *Vivarta* and real modification, as of milk into curd is called *parinamavada*. Hence, Sankara's theory of creation is known as *Vivartavada*. It is opposed to the Sankhya theory of evolution (by the real modification of Prakriti) which is known as *parinamavada*. Ramanuja's theory is a kind of *parinamavada* as he admits that the unconscious element in God really changes into the world. In both *vivartavada* and *parinamavada* it is commonly held that the effect (*karya*) is already contained in the material cause and therefore, both the views come under *satkaryavada* or the theory that the effect is existent (*sat*).

Now from various passages in Srimanta Sankaradeva's work, it can be gathered that he is a believer in the *vivartavada* type of *satkaryavada*. Corroborating the view in the Kevaladvaitavada, Sankaradeva believes that the Brahman does not undergo any real change like the actor on a stage or the rope appearing as a snake²⁴.

The commonly accepted Upanisadic view is that God is both immanent and transcendent. We find Kevaladvaitavadin Sankara reconciling the immanence and transcendence of God in his scheme. But Ramanuja, the Visistadvaitavadin, seems to face difficulty in effecting such reconciliation. But Srimanta Sankaradeva is out and out a believer in God being both immanent and Transcendent²⁵.

²⁴ **kācile nataka yena bhinna rupa dekhi //**
manara kalpanā mane samasta samsāra /
 - *AP*, v. 65.6

brahma vyatireke yata dekhā michā āna /
jarita upaji yena āche sarpa jnāna //
 - *Bhagavata*, XII, vv. 171

²⁵ **yena jala vāyu / prthivi ākāsa**
vyāpi āche carācara /
sehimate mayo / mana buddhi prāna /
vyāpi ācho samastara // etc

In the course of deliberation above, there comes an impression that in many a point Sankaradeva is similar or nearer to Sankaracaryya in his Vedantic views. But his *Bhaktivada* (the cult of devotion to **Visnu-Krsna**) brings him nearer to Ramanuja, far away from Sankara. Here it is argued that as parinamavada is the proper foundation for Bhaktivada, Sankaradeva's belief in vivartavada will be inconsistent with his religious philosophy which is undoubtedly monotheism and not monism. We have an impression that the Assamese saint sought to strike a synthesis here also. Though his illustration of the rope and the snake in the context of relation of God and the world shows him as a *vivartavadin*, the example of gold and earring in the same context given by him elsewhere makes him behave as a *parinamavadin*²⁶. There are other passages also in support of this contention. Maybe, he viewed the issue from two standpoints, one of a *jnanin* (Knower of Brahman) and the other of a *bhakta* (devotee of **Lord Krsna**).

Pending further examination, even if we admit that Sankaradeva subscribed to the religious ideology of parinamavada, it does not go to prove that Sankaradeva followed Visistadvaitavadin Ramanuja in respect of all his views and practices. We propose to point out here in brief some important differences between the two Vaisnavite philosophers advocating the cult of devotion.

(1) Ramanuja is found **not** to have made a single mention of *Srimad-bhagavata*, which is the very foundation of Sankaradeva's religious doctrine. (2) While **Narayana** is the God of worship for Ramanuja, Sankaradeva accepted **Krsna**, instead. Though

mote ācai ito jagata mai punu
jagatare vyatireka //

tomāta prthaka nohe prapanca yateka /
tumi punu jagatara sadā vyatireka // etc
- *Bhagavata*, VII

²⁶ tumi Paramātmā jagatara isa eka /
eko vastu nāhike tomāra vyatireka //
tumi kārya kārana samasta carācara /
suvarne kundale yena nāhike antara //
- *Kirttana*, 519-20

Narayana and Krsna are essentially one and the same, **Sri-Krsna** is most suited to Sankaradeva's *rasamayi-bhakti*. (3) Sankaradeva recognized Sri-Krsna as his **only** object of worship and did not accept Radha or Laksmi along with Him. But Ramanuja accepted Laksmi along with Narayana; (4) Ramanuja accepted the idol of God and offered worship. In the scheme of Sankaradeva, the *Srimad-bhagavata* found place in lieu of the idol of God; (5) As for the methods of spiritual practice, Sankaradeva accepted two of the nine types of *bhakti* recognized by the *Srimad-bhagavata* (vide *Srimad-bhagavata mahapurana*, VII/5/23-24), namely *sravana* (hearing) and *kirttana* (singing Hari's Name constantly). Against this, we find Ramanuja admitting *dhyana* (meditation) and *nididhyasana* (profound and repeated meditation).

It is pointed out that Kevaladvaitavadin Sankara also believed in Bhakti which, in his opinion, is the best amongst the factors leading to liberation²⁷. Here we are to remember that this *bhakti* of Sankara is completely different from that of Sankaradeva. By *bhakti* Sankara understands a search of one's own nature²⁸ (which finally comes to be knowledge of identity between the Brahman and the individual self). In this sense only Bhakti fits in as the cause of Liberation, which again, in Sankara's opinion, results from the *knowledge* of the Absolute²⁹. But *bhakti* of Srimanta Sankaradeva is a unique and **complete surrender** to the Lord to the exclusion of all desires³⁰. In Sankaradeva's scheme, bhakti is even superior to liberation.

²⁷ **moksakaranasamagryam bhaktireva gariyasi** - *Vivekacudamani*

²⁸ **svasvarupanusandhanam bhaktirityabhidhiyate** - *ibid*, 31

²⁹ **Brahmasiddhistattvajnanena; Brahmatmaikatva jnanena moksah siddhyati, nanyatha** - *Vivekacudamani*

³⁰

**tomāra advaitarupa
parama ānandapada
tāte mora magna hauka cita / etc**
- *Kirttana, Vedastuti*, 1669-70

**eke Brahma āchā sarva dehate prakati /
yena eka ākāsa pratyeka ghate ghate //**

**jalata suryaka yena dekhi bhinna bhinna /
sehimate jānibā Brahmaro bhedahina //**
- *Bhagavata*, XII, vv. 171-174

Thus it is seen that Srimanta Sankaradeva made adjustments to the fundamentals of Vedanta in order to fit them with his doctrine of devotion to the personal God **Krsna**. It is not possible to identity his views completely with any of the traditional Vedantic views.

But despite his advocating a way of worship to a personal God, Srimanta Sankaradeva is out and out a Vedantist as he was a staunch believer in the absolute and non-dualistic character of the Supreme Entity. His writings on Brahman strongly support this contention. It may be maintained, in fine, that the Vedantic view of Srimanta Sankaradeva deserves to be separately named as of Sricaitanyadeva or of the other Vaisnava Vedantists of the period.

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yateka ākr̥ti māne māyāmaya sr̥sti /
hena jāni kevala Brah̥mata diyā dr̥sti //
sehimate ekaika advaita ātmā buddha /
māyā upādhira pade dekhi bahubidha //
- *Bhagavata*, X

prakrtita āche mātra vyavahāra dharma /
tumisi svarupa paripurna Param-Brah̥ma //
- *Bhagavata*, X