

# Spirituality in Sankaradeva: A Philosophical Study

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Sankaradeva's spiritualism is influenced by the concept of Lord Vishnu depicted in the Rgveda, Mahabharata and Upanisads. His fundamental teaching is influenced by Bhāgavata Purānas in harmony with Gita. Though Vaisnavism is flourished in the Vedic period, in Assam the Neo-Vaisnavite faith is flourished by the initiative of Sankaradeva in the 15th century.<sup>1</sup> According to Sankaradeva, God is considered as the supreme reality. He also claimed that the same God is also regarded as the Absolute or Brahman.<sup>2</sup> His philosophical thought is based especially on Vedanta philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is said that Sankaradeva's religio-philosophy is established through the important signification of monism of Vedanta and devotionism of the Gita and Bhagavata.<sup>4</sup> Sankaradeva developed his philosophy and religion for the sake of one's spiritual and social upliftment.<sup>5</sup>

## ***Brahman* or God, Soul and the World:**

In Sankaradeva's philosophy, there is a synthesis of metaphysical absolutism and personal theism.<sup>6</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, *Brahman* is the Supreme Reality.<sup>7</sup> The embodied form of Brahman is Vasudeva Krishna.<sup>8</sup> He is also considered as Narayana or Vishnu or Bhagavān, the highest God which is depicted in the Bhagavata Purānas and Gitā. For him, God is considered as the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. God is Eternal, Omnipresent, Omniscient, One and the ultimate truth.<sup>9</sup> According to Sankaradeva, God is considered as Pure Consciousness – *Saccidānanda* – *sat* (truth), *cit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss).

*Brahman* (the Absolute), *Paramātma* (the Supreme Soul), and *Isvara* (God) indicates the same Reality in Sankaradeva's philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, Reality is both 'Saguna' and 'Nirguna'. In Sankaradeva's philosophy, Krishna is considered as the ultimate reality that possesses both the 'Saguna' and 'Nirguna' aspects.<sup>11</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, the world and individual souls are as real as God because they are the manifestations of God.<sup>12</sup> Again, according to him, the world and the individual souls are not considered as God's *Lilā* or play only, they are also His parts.<sup>13</sup>

Sankaradeva considers God as the ultimate reality of soul and matter. They cannot exist without Him. They exist in him and not separable. Though they emerged from *paramātman*, they are not identical with *paramātma*. They have independent existence, but related.<sup>14</sup>

Sankaradeva insists that it is easy to conceive God as Love than to conceive Absolute as Truth. His religion and philosophy is suited to all the peoples who belong to different caste, creed or colour.<sup>15</sup>

Like the āstika schools of Indian Philosophy, the concept of individual self and the absolute self is found in Sankaradeva's philosophy. The individual soul is known as *jivātma* (embodied soul) and the Absolute soul is *paramātma* (disembodied soul). Individual soul or individual consciousness is considered as the part of God.<sup>16</sup> It is depicted in *Brahma sūtra* and also in *Bhagavadgītā*. According to Sankaradeva, God is the inner controller of one's self.<sup>17</sup> It is also depicted in the *Brihadaranyaka upanisād*-

“He who dwells in the earth and is within the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is, who controls the earth from within - he is your Self, the inner controller, immortal.”

Again, it is mentioned,

“He who dwells in all beings and is within all beings whom the beings do not know, whose body all beings are, who controls all beings from within-he is your Self, the inner controller, the immortal.”<sup>18</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, though individual souls are real, they are dependent upon God for their existence. Due to ignorance and *karma sanskara* they get the fruits of their actions and also bound in the cycle of birth and death.<sup>19</sup> In this stage of bondage, the *jiva* experiences pain and

pleasure. According to Sankaradeva, God is considered as witness consciousness of the *jivas*. He insists that through *bhakti* or devotion, one is able to realize the exact relationship of the *jiva* and Absolute consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, when the ego is removed, *māyā* is disappeared and intellect or *buddhi* is free from illusory knowledge, then one sees the *Brahman*.<sup>21</sup>

### **Māyāvāda:**

*Māyāvāda* is considered as a philosophical doctrine in Indian philosophy. Vedanta system gives importance on this doctrine for explaining the relation between *Brahman* and the world. Sankaradeva regards *māyā* as the active principle of creation. For Sankaradeva, *māyā* is not considered as unreal because God's creation is possible only with the cooperation of *māyā*.<sup>22</sup>

Sankaradeva considers God as the controller of *māyā* and it is possible through His power of consciousness and *jiva* is considered as under the pressure of *māyā*. The attainment of *jñāna* through *bhakti* is the way to get rid of *māyā*.<sup>23</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, *māyā* does not indicate the world as a mere *vivarta* of *Brahman*, it actually indicates the world as the *parināma* of *Brahman*.<sup>24</sup>

### **Liberation:**

According to Sankaradeva, the supreme end of life is liberation of the self. Liberation means freedom from suffering. For him, devotion to God is the only way to liberation. In other words, when an aspirant purified his mind and followed *bhakti yoga* then he can attain liberation. *Gitā* asserts *bhakti yoga*, *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* as a means to liberation but Sankaradeva gives superiority on *bhakti yoga*.<sup>25</sup>

Devotion or *bhakti* means worship, prayer, faith, love, purification of mind and selfless service to persons. According to Sankaradeva, God realization is possible only through devotion. Devotion is considered as a kind of spiritual intuition or insight.<sup>26</sup>

Sankaradeva again said that *bhakti* is considered as superior than

moksa or liberation. Bhakti is defined itself as mukti by Sankaradeva. In Bhakti-ratnakara, Sankaradeva says-

“Though the state of liberation is all happiness, yet *Bhakti* is superior to *mukti*, in as much, the latter is devoid of joy inherent in the service to the Lord, while the bliss of *Mukti* is inherent in the former (*bhakti*). Therefore, according to him, liberation is inherent in *bhakti* and comes automatically taking its own course.”<sup>27</sup>

Sankaradeva’s *dharma* is known as *Bhāgavata dharma*, *Mahāpurūsiya dharma* or *eka sarana nāma dharma* which emphasized the surrender of self to Hari or God and through *sravana* and *kirtana* one is able to purify one’s mind.<sup>28</sup> Sankaradeva regards *sravana* or hearing as the first stage in the spiritual enlightenment. Hearing about the divine life of Krishna and hearing religious discourses from the learned people purifies the mind from all evil deeds and thoughts. Similarly, *kirtana* or recitation of the name of God removes all the miseries and sufferings and also develops loving devotion for God.<sup>29</sup>

*Bhakti* or devotion to God is attained only if one knows to love and respects one’s fellow worshippers or other human beings.<sup>30</sup>

The other values of life such as *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *Mokhya* are subordinate to *bhakti*. Bliss and spiritual enjoyment is possible only by *bhakti*. It removes the I-consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

The attachment of the mind of the worshipper or the devotee to God is considered as *Prema-bhakti*. Sankaradeva emphasized particularly *dasya* type of *bhakti*. The servanthood of a worshipper or a devotee and God as a master is given importance in Sankaradeva’s philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, without devotion, liberation cannot be considered as goal. Devotion is considered as a way as well as a goal.<sup>33</sup>

According to Sankaradeva, liberation or moksa can be attained even in this life also. This is considered as *Jivan-mukti*. Sankaradeva, in his *Kirtan*, says –

“He who sees Vishnu in the entire world gets salvation forthwith even while alive of all the means by far the best is to deem all creatures as one’s own self.”<sup>34</sup>

Like *Upanisads* and *Gītā*, Sankaradeva also emphasized *niskāma bhakti*. *niskāma bhakti* is necessary for the individual and social development and also for the attainment of ultimate goal. When one is able to free oneself from all the desires and the sense of I-consciousness, then he attains supreme bliss.<sup>35</sup>

Sankaradeva’s Advaitism is considered as both theistic and humanistic. He teaches all to remain grateful to the maker of all, the personal God.<sup>36</sup>

From the above discussion, it is found that in Sankaradeva’s philosophy spiritualism is embedded in his conception of *Brahman* or God, the world, soul, *māyā*, liberation and *bhakti*. His philosophy followed monotheistic faith which believes that there is only God of worship. In Sankaradeva’s philosophy, for purifying one’s mind and freedom from desires *sravana-kirtana* or *bhakti* is given emphasized. *Prema-bhakti*, which is advocated by Sankaradeva, is necessary for God’s realization. For this reason, his philosophy and religion attracts the devotees of all races and his ‘God as Love’ provokes universal spirit among the people and developed the qualities of love, kindness etc. which help to grow the spiritually and socially developed society.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 1-6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. P. 33.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. P. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. P. 144.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. P. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurūsiyāism*. P. 105-106.

<sup>7</sup>Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 25.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. P. 165.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. P. 25-26.

<sup>10</sup>Chakrabarty, Dr. Amalendu (ed.): *Prācyā-Prajñā*, Volume III. P. 166.

<sup>11</sup>Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurūsiyāism*. P. 105.

- <sup>12</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. P. 39.
- <sup>14</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar: *Sankaradeva Vaishnava saint of Assam*. P. 87-88.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. P. 96.
- <sup>16</sup> Chakrabarty, Dr. Amalendu (ed.): *Prācyā-Prajñā, Volume III*. P. 162-163.
- <sup>17</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 166-167.
- <sup>18</sup> Sharma, D. S.: *The Upanishads, an Anthology*. P. 211-213.
- <sup>19</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 32.
- <sup>20</sup> Chakrabarty, Dr. Amalendu (ed.): *Prācyā-Prajñā, Volume III*. P. 163.
- <sup>21</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 169.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. 72-80.
- <sup>23</sup> Neog, Maheswar: *Sankaradeva*. P. 46.
- <sup>24</sup> Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurusiyāism*. P. 139-140.
- <sup>25</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 32-34.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. P. 172.
- <sup>27</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar: *Sankaradeva Vaishnava saint of Assam*. P. 95.
- <sup>28</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 139-140.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 175-176.
- <sup>30</sup> Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurusiyāism*. P. 119.
- <sup>31</sup> Sharma, Nilima (ed.): *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva*, Vol. I. P. 142.
- <sup>32</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar: *Sankaradeva Vaishnava saint of Assam*. P. 98-99.
- <sup>33</sup> Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurusiyāism*. P. 97.
- <sup>34</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar: *Sankaradeva Vaishnava saint of Assam*. P. 94.
- <sup>35</sup> [https://attributetosankaradeva.org/teachings\\_spiritual.htm](https://attributetosankaradeva.org/teachings_spiritual.htm)
- <sup>36</sup> Chaliha, Dr. Anjana: *Papers on Vedānta & Mahāpurusiyāism*. P. 94.

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### Other Source:

1. [https://attributetosankaradeva.org/teachings\\_spiritual.htm](https://attributetosankaradeva.org/teachings_spiritual.htm)