



The Nature Of God In Sankardeva's Religious Philosophy

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Abstract

It is generally believed that religion is not independent of philosophy. The two terms- Religion and Philosophy are interwoven. But, this concept of interconnectedness between the two terms is sometimes not valid in western domain of philosophical tradition. In the west a philosophical tradition may developed without any affiliation to religion. However, the case is not same in oriental tradition except a few. Oriental philosophical traditions developed in the fertile soil of religion. On the other hand, the Bhakti Movement which swept across north-south, east-west provinces of medieval India helped in the growth and the development of several schools of philosophy.¹ It is to be mentioned that prior to the advent of Vaishnava Movement (Bhakti Movement), Sankaracharya established the most famous philosophical tradition – Adaitavada.

The history of medieval India is the history of Vaishnava Movement or more popularly known as Bhakti Movement. From 12th to 17th century of Christian era, there was a world-wide reformation and many reformers were born in various parts of India too under the leadership of various regional reformers and saint-poets. All the Vaishnava reformers did their best to reform the society which fell into the deep well of superstition, orthodoxy, caste system, untouchability etc. There was no way of salvation for them. The Brahmanical cult which evolved thousands of years ago was responsible for the man degradation of the society. They also exploited the mass people in the name of Vedic rituals. The society started decaying when the Brahmanical cult raised their head in the society. There was no difference between the lives of lower casts and beasts. Both the two classes of beings were treated by the so-called upper class in the same manner. As a result lacks of people had to spend their day-to-day life as beasts. It is to be noted that all there nasty behavior shown to them by their masterly class in the name of religion. So the great souls of the society came out with zeal to take the necessary steps to reform the society. In this pupose, various saint-poets or Vaishnava Gurus were born in India. They tried their best of level to establish the equal status of every human being in the society. They taught the people to worship only one God i.e. Narayana-Vishnu instead of innumerable gods and goddess, they broke the barrier of class system. Instead of Sanskrit language, the reformers stressed common men and women to pray God in their mother tongue. Among all the galaxy of Vaishnava reformers, Srimanta

Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D) of north-eastern part of India was the brightest star. Vaishnavism was introduced in Assam by Srimanta Sankaradeva, who founded the “Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma” sect. He was not only religious teacher; rather he was a poet, composer, musician, painter, artist, dramatist, actor, producer, integrator of mankind etc. He was a prolific writer in Assamese, Sanskrit and Maitheli. He was succeeded by his disciple Madhavadeva (1492-1596 A.D.) who also possessed considerable literary talent.² Srimanta Sankaradeva was basically a social reformer to an excellence and to that end and view he took the media of religion. His religion is known as “Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma”³, or most popularly known as ‘Mahapurusiya Dharma’. It is the religion of love, compassion and total surrender to Bhagavana Srikrishna. The ‘term “Mahapurusiya” is derived from the epithet ‘Mahapurusha’ as mentioned in the Bhagavata.⁴ The very term is explained by Sridharswami as- “÷ýÃÃ±ÁóÁ1n,Ëø,± çÁõøÃŽ™|ðÃíûþÐ¼ üüÉ ûç!œðÄ, |X±Ñ ßÁÁÁõÇîÃ±÷Ã¼ ÷îÃ ÕÍýÃÃîÃÁßÁí”⁵. Madhavadeva explained the term as “÷ýÃÃ±ÁóÁ1n,ø,1 Îü»ßÁ”⁶

Like all other Vaishnava reformers, Srimanta Sankaradeva accepted the Vedas as the source of all religions. The end of the Veda is Vedanta or Vedanta Darshana or Brahma Sutra. All Vaishnava saints and philosophers developed their own school of religious-philosophy on the basis of Vedanta Darshana. Although the Vedanta is considered as the end of Veda, but the former is not the gist of the later. But the Bhagavata declares that the very scripture is the essence of all the Vedantas.⁷ So, in his religious philosophy⁸, Sankaradeva regarded the Bhagavata as sole scripture of his religion. The Bhagavata declares that Bhagavana Krishna is the God itself.⁹ All the gods and goddesses are his various manifestations. Besides, the essence of Bhagavata is the companion of pious men, devotion to Bhagavana Krishna and Sravana Kirtana as the only mode of worship to Hindu.¹⁰

Srimanta Sankaradeva regards the world as the body of the God-

Jata Lata taru trina Kahako nedekha bhinna
Harira sarira buli mane/
Sabako pranama kari sarbakshyane nama smare
Krishna bina anaka najane //¹¹

But the world is not real, only real is the God Himself; rest is unreal and a part of God.¹² In this context there is specific reference in the writings of Sankaradeva, denouncing the world as an illusion-

Tumi satya brahma micha jagata srajana /
Tomara mayaye karai tomara kalpana // ¹³

Though Sankaradeva said that the world is unreal, but since it is manifested through the ‘Brahma’, it is supposed to be real-

Tumi satya brahma tomata parakase
Jagata ito asanta /
Jagatato sada tumio prakasa
Antaryami bhagavanta //14

So, the whole world is nothing, but 'Brahma' who alone is the truth. He (Brahma) manifested the universe as the possessor of power and controller.

Sankaradeva has elevated God to the rank of Brahma rather than bringing Him down to lower level. At the beginning of his magnum opus – the Kirtana Ghosha, Sankaradeva admits of one supreme reality, who assumes forms and who is the cause of all incarnations.

He wrote :

prathame pranamo brahmarupi sanatana
sarva abatarara karana narayana 15

i.e. First of all, I bow down to Narayana, the eternal one, in the form of Brahma, the cause of all incarnations. Here Sankaradeva does not intend to identify Narayana with Brahma, but he is said to be the form of Brahma. It is to be noted that, in this context the form does not carry literal meaning, because Brahma has no form -i.e. He is formless. It means that Narayana has the significance of Brahma. Again, Sankaradeva has laid emphasis on bhakti rather than other means for obtaining godhood. So, he considered God above all and bhakti to Him is the only means to attain godhood. A personal god is necessary in the path of bhakti. So, in his religious concept personal god Narayana-Vishnu or Srikrishna is considered as the highest being. In his religious philosophy, Sankaradeva considers the relation between God and man as master and servant. This relation can be made through Dashya Bhava only. So, in Sankaradeva's religious philosophy we find that he always emphasized on Dshya Bhava instead of other Bhavas as stressed by other Vaishnava saints in India. He elevated man's attitude towards God as that of a faithful and obedient servant.

He said :

Aisvarya janjala nalage amaka
Chinda mora moha-pasa;
Kara prabhu daya janame janame haibo
Tomara dasaro dasa.16

As a servant serves his master faithfully, like wise a true devotee of Narayana-Vishnu must serve God without keeping any desire. Only then the devotee may feel oneness with God. He wrote :

Ahangkara gucile brahmako jive dekhe
Maya ere apuni budhira guce bhrama /
nirmala hridaye jive dekhe paramabrahma
jibalate jnyana-astre chide ahankare /

chinda karma bandha jive teve apunara
hridayal parama ananda hove jata /
paripurna atma hove manate sakhyata
dehako nedekhe jive hove brahmamaya
eheka buliba raja otyantika laya¹⁷

This is the way of attaining godhood for a devotee. The above mentioned lines of Sankaradeva clearly states that when ego of a devotee removes, the individual sees God and then automatically maya (illusion) disappears and intellect becomes free from illusionary knowledge. In this respect we may quote from Mahapurusha Madhavadeva's Namghosha. In his magnum opus-the Namghosha, Madhavadeva wrote :

muktita nispriha jito sehi bhakataka namo
Rasamayee magoho bhakati,
Samasta mastaka mani nija bhakatar baishya
Bhajo hena deva jadupati/¹⁸

i.e. Detached from salvation – I bow to that devotee – beseech succulent devotion-with the gems of crest-submissive to his own devotees- to that Jadupati my prostration.

Again,

Jara rama krisha nama name bhava sindhu tari
pawe parampada papi jata,
sadananda sanatana henaya krishnaka sada
upasa karoha hridayata /¹⁹

i.e. Whose names are Rama Krishna-boats across the ocean of life-final bliss for sinners- eternal joy perpetual being-daily to such a Krishna-worship my heart offers. According to Madhavadeva God (Lord Krishna) is the Supreme Being.²⁰ He is 'Bhagavanta'.²¹ He is omnipresent.²² The concept of an imminent God is clear in the religious philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva. He (God) is everywhere and is everybody's heart. He (God) remains everywhere as the 'Antaryami'-

Samasta bhutara hridayata asha tumi /
Parama sundara manohara antaryami// ²³
Similarly-
bahire bhitare jana ito jagatara /
Paripurna rupe acho parama iswara // ²⁴

In this religious philosophy Sankaradeva always asked his followers and disciples to be pure, pious, ego free in mind and heart. In the Bhakti Ratnakara he said- "take refuge in God with mind, body and speech."²⁵ Moreover, he said -"one who does not lend ones ear on the glory of God is like a beast. The man who does not praise God can be said to possess the tongue of food. The hands adorned with good are like those of a corpse if not used to serve

God. The feet of a person who does not visit the shrines of Bhagavana Krishna are like the roots of a tree.”²⁶

God is eternal. The eternity of God is commonly expressed in the religious philosophy of Sankaradeva. God lives forever; He always was and he will be forever : there never was a time when He was not; there never will be a time when there is no God. Like many theologians, Sankaradeva has taken God to be eternal in rather a different sense, holding that God’s duration is not just an ever lasting duration but is strictly speaking no duration at all. According to him God is omniscient. An omniscient whether he be God or other being is a perfect. So he is not subject to change at any circumstances that is throughout the eternity he remains unchanged. A perfect being known past, present and future, that is he knows everything. A being who knows everything always knows what time it is. For such an omnipotence and omnipresent being there is no difference between God and soul. In this context we may quote from Sankaradeva’s writings:

Tumi jagatara gatimati pitamata
Tumi paramatma jagatara esta eka
Eko bastu nahike tomata byetireka /
Tumi karya karana samasta caracara
Subarna kundala jen nahike antar /
Tumi pashu pakshi surasura taru trina
Agyanata murhajane dekhe bhinna bhinna /
Tomarase mayaye mohita sarbakshane
Timi atma tomaka najane ekojane /
Samaste bhutare tumi acha hridayata
Tattva napai tomak bicare bahirata /
Tumise kebae satya mica sabe ana
Jani jnyanijane kare hridayata dhyana /²⁷

i.e. I do adore Thee, on the ordainer of the creation. Thou art the sole refuge, the savior, the heart and the mother and father of the universe. Thou art the Supreme Soul and the only Lord of the world. Here is nothing else real in the world except Thee.

Thou art the cause and effect of all, including animate and inanimate objects, just as there no difference good and the erring. Thou art the animals, birds, the Suras and Asuras. The trees and plants, but the fools due to ignorance perceive Thee as distinct. Thou art in the hearts of all the creatures; being unable to perceive the truth, the fools seek Thee outside.

Thou art the Real Truth, others are all unreal; knowing this those endowed with the True knowledge, meditate on Thee in their hearts. I do not pray for any enjoyment of pleasures and also I am not desirous of salvation, but let me have devotion only at Thy Feet.

From the above discussion we may say that the philosophic concept of God of Srimanta Sankaradeva is so versatile in outlook that he cannot be clubbed as an Adaitavadins,

Daitavadins or Bisistadaitavadins. He is above all or all the 'Vadins' are reflected in his doctrines. So, he has no direct affiliation to any of the form of Vaishnava Schools as mentioned earlier. In this respect, he is unique and incomparable. He did not follow or borrow any idea of religious philosophy from any commentaries in detail and developed his own concept of God and Philosophy.

Krishna- the object of his worship is devoid of all qualities. The 'jiva' may easily attain the qualitlessness by chanting incessantly the qualities of God.²⁸ The One and the same 'Brahma' is present in each living or non-living things as the One and the same space (akasha) is present in each 'jiva' (the being). The 'Brahma' is one :

Eka brahma acha sarba dehaka prakate /
Jena eka akasha pratyeka ghate ghate //
Jalata surjaka jena dekhi bhinna bhinna /
Sehimate janiba brahmaro bheda hina // ²⁹

Moreover, He is the controller of both prakriti and purusha :

Prakriti purusha duiro niyanta madhava /
Samstare atma hari parama bandhava // ³⁰

According to Mahapurusha Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva- Lord Krishna is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the whole universe, not only that He is the stealer of all sorrows misery, He is the Lord of the 'Maya' (illusion), He is the essence of all.³¹

References :

1. They are namely four in numbers-
 - (a) Sri Sampradaya of Ramanuja
 - (b) Brahma Sampradaya of
 - (c) Rudra Sampradaya of Nimbarkacharya
 - (d) Sanaka Sampradaya of Vishnuswami.
2. Patterns of Indian Hagiography (Indian edition), Srikrishna Prakashan. Guwahati, 2003, P. - 7.
3. Bhatima - Madhavadeva.
4. Oh, the most exalted person, oh, the protector of devotees, I bow to your lotus teet which are worthy of being constantly meditated upon, put an end to all discomfiture, failed all desired booms, which are the focus of all sacred places, are extolled by Siva and Brahma, afford shelter to all and dispei the distress of devotees and which serve as a bark for crossing the ocean of mended existence (11.5.33). Oh, the most exalted and righteous person, I bow to Thy Lotus - Feet, which ran after by Thy beloved One (Sita). You resigned the royal fortune which was coveted by the gods and was most difficult to

- forsake – (merely) of the word of your father and went away (in exile) to the forest (11.5.34).
5. Commentary of the sloka – 2.1.10 (Bhagavata).
 6. Namghosha.
 7. Sankaradeva
 8. Philosophy : Greek philosophia; love of wisdom, study of ultimate realities and general principles, the system of theories on the nature of things or rules for the conduct of life (Dictionary of Literary Terms, Prakash Book Depot, 1976).
 9. Krishnastu Bhagavana Swayam.
 10. Yadyapi nabadha bhakti MadhabarShravan kirtan ata ati sushthatar – Bhagavat Canto – 1.
 11. Nimi Nava Sidha Sambad, verse – 67.
 12. Kirtanghosha by Sankaradeva, Bhagavata – 7.
 13. Kurukhetra verse – 488.
 14. Bedastuti, Kirtanghosha, verse –14
 15. KirtanGhosha– Chaturbingsati Abatar Barnan- 1
 16. Sri Sankar Byakyamrita; (ed.)– Harinarayan Dutta Barua. Part-1, 3rd edition, 1985, P.- 227.....
 17. ibid. P.-929
 18. Madhavadeva – Namghosha, verse-1
 19. ibid.verse-2.
 20. Namghosha – verse – 588.
 21. Namghosha – verse – 176. Bhagavata – 1.2.11
 22. Bargit by Sankaradeva.
 23. Bhakti by Sankaradeva.
 24. Bhagavata xi verse – 254
 25. Sankaradeva– Bhakti Ratnakara-211.
 26. Sankaradeva – Bhagavata -vv-1246-1250
 27. Sankaradeva – Kirtana Ghosha – 519-522
 28. Tumi prabhu nirguna gunara sima nai, Nirguna howaya jiva sehi guna
 29. Bhagavata xii, verse – 174.
 30. Namghosha, verse – 405.
 31. Namghosha, verse – 588.