

# Sankaradeva's concept of God A Philosophical Study

Banti Borah  
HOD Philosophy

Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva, the founder of Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam was a genius, who is known by all sections of the assamese society. He was a living personality whose thought and creation influenced every aspect of assamese life. He dreamt of a democratized assamese society and tried his level best to actualize it by means of his Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith in the fifteenth century. In this present century also he remains as a hidden force for all of the assamese people. Though Śaṅkaradeva was not an academic philosopher or speculative thinker, there is scope to interpret him as a philosopher. His ideal was not to propound a religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system based on devotion and faith. In-fact, his religion was the outcome of the demand of the prevailing circumstances of that time. Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is also known as Eka-Śaraṇa Nāma-Dharma or Māhapuruṣīa dharma which signifies the religion of taking shelter in one Deity.

Like all other existing religions the concept of God plays a vital role in the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva. The main tenet of Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy is non dualism. According to him, God is one and He is the Ultimate Reality. For him, jiva and jagata are nothing but appearance of Brahman. God is the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the world. He is both immanent and transcendent of the world. Śaṅkaradeva emphasizes on both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and

also believes in the incarnation of God. Śaṅkaradeva gives importance on the merit of adoring and worshipping Krishna as the one and the only God.

Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement mainly derived its theologism from Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Gitā. He however followed consistently the commentary of Śrīdharaśvāmi, an ascetic of the Monistic school of Śaṅkarācārya. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa explains God as the ultimate essence of the universe. He conceives God as the absolute reality of this universe. God is real while everything else is false. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa describes God as immanent as well as transcendent and having both nirguṇa (attributeless) and saguṇa (full of attribute) aspects. Without denying the impersonal aspect Śaṅkaradeva gives stress on saguṇa aspect of God. In his famous work "Kirtana- Ghosā" Śaṅkaradeva describes the twofold aspect of God and there he says that as indeterminate God is not comprehensible, devotees including the gods (devas) worship and adore His beatific form as Nārāyaṇa<sup>1</sup>. Mādhavadeva also describes God as nirguṇa, devoid of adjuncts (upadhirahita) and of the nature of effulgence (jyotirupa) but recommends Krishna for the devotion<sup>2</sup>. So both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva accept the nirguṇa and saguṇa aspects of God. In-fact, Sankaradeva was of the opinion that when the Supreme Reality is viewed as the conjurer of the world-show or as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world, it appears as the personal God receiving adoration from devotees.

This personal God is then known as Bhagavat or Īsvara. But when the same reality is viewed from a purely idealistic view-point, without having any connection with the creation, it is conceived as the indeterminate, impersonal Brahma. So, when Brahman manifests for the creation He is known as Nārāyaṇa or Vāsudeva.

Śaṅkaradeva uses various synonymous names of Nārāyaṇa like, Vāsudeva, Kesava, Mādhava, Janārdana, Govinda, Krishna etc. According to Śaṅkaradeva, the Supreme Being or Nārāyaṇa possesses the three attributes Sat, Cit and Ananda. He is pure bliss, self differentiated and ground of all life. He is infinite in nature and attributes. He is omniscient, omnipotent, creator, preserver and destroyer of all. Śaṅkaradeva considers Nārāyaṇa as both the cause as well as the effect of this creation. The Supreme Reality or God is called by various names. Sankaradeva writes in Nimi-Navasiddha -

*Brahma paramatma bhagavanta eka tattva  
Eka rase tini nama laksana bhedata.*

“God as the director and controller of sense in known as Paramatman and as a creator, preserver and destroyer of the world He is Bhagavat, when God appears to yogins in their meditation after the disappearance of ignorance, He is called Brahman. Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavat are the names of the one Reality. The same reality is called by different names owing to different characteristics seen from different angles.”<sup>3</sup>

From the philosophical point of view Śaṅkaradeva can be considered as a monist. In order to establish his monistic position Śaṅkaradeva tries to show the unreality of the world and the individual selves. For him, Brahman is the sole reality of the world. He is the soul of this universe. For Śaṅkaradeva, jiva and jagata are creations of Paramatama. In the body of each living being, the Parāmatma is

present as Atman. The individual self is a part of God tied down with illusion. He observes that mind or manas, which determines the quality and activity of the body is the product of maya. Due to ignorance the embodied self associates itself with the activities of the body. For Sankaradeva, there is no difference between God and Soul. Brahman and Atman are identical. The later appears as limited and finite because of its association with the body. Sankaradeva writes, “A lamp is supposed to give light so long as there is contact between the wick, oil and fire; similarly, the noumenal self goes by the name jiva and suffers pain and miseries of the world so long as it is associated with the body, mind and senses. But know it for certain that that worldly existence really concerns the body and mind and not the self.”<sup>4</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva takes the help of pratibimbavada to explain how one Absolute appears as many. Paramatma is reflected on individual mind as the one sun appears as many in the different receptacles of water. According to him, Paramatma is the sole reality of soul and matter. In Kirtan-Ghosa he writes-

*Tumi Paramatama jagatara Isa ek  
Eko bastu nahike tomata vyatirek.*<sup>5</sup>

“Thou art the Supreme Self, the only Lord of the universe. There is no other thing except Thee.

Like Śaṅkaracarya, Śaṅkaradeva explains the origin and nature of the world as vivarta or an illusory appearance of Brahman through the doctrine of maya. Śaṅkaradeva applied the analogies of gold and gold ornaments, of clay and clay made vessels, of fire and sparks, of yarn and cloth. Seen from the viewpoint of absolute reality (paramartha vicara) the gold ornaments, clay vessels and sparks are not real but are in reality gold, clay and fire. In the same way the jivas and the world, which have been called parts of Brah-

man, are not real transformations of Brahman but are apparent names and forms. Śaṅkaradeva uses Advaitic analogy of rope and snake to explain the process of evolution. So in Śaṅkaradeva's opinion, though the world and individual souls appear as real; but in the ultimate analysis the names and forms do not persist, and there is nothing apart from Brahman. In Kirtan-Ghosa he writes-

*"Mukuta mandala jena subarnare bhinna  
nuhi*

*Micha matra nam rup jata*

*Ahamkara pancha bhuta tumara prithak nuhi  
Prabhu paramartha visarati"*<sup>6</sup>

"Just as mukuta mandala is not really different from gold, but different in names and forms only, so also in the ultimate analysis (paramartha vicara) ahamkara and panchabhuta are not different from God."

Ramanuja's interpretation is something different from Sankaradeva. Ramanuja, Nimbarka and others hold that the jiva is a real part of Brahman, even as the light issuing from fire is a part of fire. Ramanuja denies that the creation and the created world are illusory. He says that within the all-inclusive God (Brahman) there are both unconscious matter (acit) and the finite spirits (cit). So, for Ramanuja the creation is a fact and the created world is as real as Brahman.

Śaṅkaradeva holds that God is immanent in the world, and at same time transcends it. Like Śaṅkaracarya, Śaṅkaradeva also admits maya as the power of God. Maya conceals God and holds the objects of attachment (asara visaya) unto the individual self through avarana (concealment) and viksepa (projection). God pervades the entire universe, but is not affected by its merit and demerits. Sankaradeva holds the creation of this world as lila of God. Before creation God alone was there and after destruction there will be only God.

Śaṅkaradeva gives importance on the saguna sakara worship of God. He says that the Highest self manifests himself out of grace for the worshippers with the help of his power of consciousness in the form, which is the source of incarnations of Brahma himself. This form is above the limitations, and is all consciousness and delight devoid of all differences. It is different from the world, being the creator of all. The worshipful is thus a manifested form, from which the incarnations evolved, but at the same time, who is beyond time, qualities and predicates (upadhi). In the very first verse of his Kirtana-ghosa Sankaradeva salutes this form, which he calls Brahmarupi Sanatana and Narayana. Of all the manifestations (avatars) of Narayana, Gopala-Krishna is regarded as the most perfect one. Krishna, as the adorable deity, is not considered a partial manifestation but the Supreme Being Himself.

As a vaisnava saint Śaṅkaradeva accepts devotion as the only means of liberation. So he admits a close relation between God and devotee. Sankaradeva writes in the Kirtan-Ghosa:

*Bhakatese mor hridi janiba nichay  
Bhakata janara jana amise hriday  
Moi bina bhakate nichinte kichu jnana  
Bhakatata pare moi nichintuho ana"*<sup>7</sup>

In many places of Śaṅkaradeva's writings Narayana has been spoken as a loving and a lovable God. He is described to be in possession of all auspicious attributes which attract devotees towards him. Not only does he possess metaphysical qualities like non-duality, omnipotence, omniscience etc. but such moral virtues as mercy, love and compassion. Karunamaya (compassionate), Dinabandhu (friend of the lowly), Bhakta-vatsala (beloved of devotees), patit -pavana (redeemer of sinners) and many others are His attributes by

which He is designated. Madhavadeva in one of his verses of Namghosa writes: "Forsaking celestial Vaikuntha and hearts of yogins, God comes down to that place where ardent devotees sing His auspicious name." In the words of Maheswar Neog:

"Śaṅkaradeva admits nirguna Brahman to be the Ultimate Reality and jiva to be one with Brahman. To him, Brahman is indeterminate (nirviseṣa), changeless (avikāri) and eternal (nitya). With this monistic view, Sankaradeva seeks to combine theistic or religious idea of a determinate personal God which is pivot of his creed." <sup>8</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva believes in the incarnations of God. Śaṅkaradeva in the opening chapter of his celebrated work Kirtana enumerates twenty four incarnations of Narayana - Visnu. Narayana is spoken as the source of all incarnations including Brahma, Visnu and Siva. The first two lines of the "Kirtana-Ghosa" have struck the above note in the following way:

*Prathamē pranamo Brahma rūpi sanatana*

*Sarva avatarara karana Narayana*<sup>9</sup>

"At the very outset, I bow down to the eternal Brahma who, in the form of Narayana, is the cause of all incarnation."

But in some places Visnu and Narāyaṇa have been indiscriminately used to mean the Supreme God. Assam vaisnavism including Śaṅkaradeva acknowledged the existence of various gods enumerated in the Puranas, but all gods owe their existence to Hari. All of them including Brahma and Siva are subservient to Him and they are compared to leaves and branches of a tree of which Visnu is considered the main stem or root. Therefore, Narāyaṇa or Viṣṇu should be worshipped or adored. Other deities would be automatically pleased if Viṣṇu, the support of all could be propitiated. Because of this uncompromising

attitude towards the gods of the Hindu Pantheon other than Visnu and his incarnations, Assam Vaisnavism is known as Eka-sarandharma (religion of single-minded devotion).

The doctrine of incarnation (avataravada) as the special revelation of God is found in Gita, Puranic Hinduism and Ramanuja. This is also accepted in Christianity. On the otherhand Kabir, Gurunaṅak, Islam and Judaism do not accept the doctrine of incarnation. Strictly speaking Judaism and Islam alone have pure monotheism. The cardinal belief of Islam is contained in the Kalima: 'There is no god, but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.' That God is one and is known as Tawhid. He is eternal, without any beginning and end. Allah is said to be compassionate and most merciful. Allah is also forgiving to man.

From the philosophical point of view Sankaradeva can be treated as an advaitin. It is true that some contradictory statements suggesting dualistic tendency are also found in some places of Śaṅkaradeva's writings, but the predominance of monistic ideas cannot be denied. As he accepts the doctrine of Maya of Idealistic Monism and recognizes the identity between jiva and Isvara, Śaṅkaradeva can be interpreted as an advaitin. But it cannot be said that the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva is exactly identical with that of Śaṅkaracāryya.

Śaṅkaracāryya admits the reality as transcendental, indeterminate and impersonal one where there is a little scope for devotion. Isvara again is not the highest reality. But Sankaradeva, considering the importance of devotion or Bhakti, conceived the highest reality as a saguna one. Assamese Vaisnavas have enjoyed the worship of or devotion to the personal and at the same time immanent and transcendental God Narāyaṇa. Śaṅkaracāryya accepts immanent and personal form of God from the empirical standpoint

(vyavaharikaadrsti) and He is an object of worship from a lower stand point but Sankaradeva nowhere stated that devotion to Narayana is only step from which one can mount up to the higher level at which the indeterminate and transcendental God can be realized. Again, Saṅkaradeva nowhere stated that the personal God Naṛayaṇa is unreal in the ultimate analysis and He is real only from the practical point of view. On the contrary, Naṛayaṇa has been prescribed at all stages of the spiritual progress and no distinction has been made between vyavaharika and paramarthika view points. From the advaitic point of view nirguna and saguna aspect of God cannot be real and eternal at the same time. And if it is real, it is so only from an empirical standpoint. Saṅkaradeva did not try to remove this inconsistency. Saṅkaradeva laid more stress on the saguna aspect of God, because this aspect is more suitable for the cultivation of devotion by the average mass people.

#### Conclusion:

From the above discussion it is clear that Saṅkaradeva's writings on the concept of God clearly reflect his monistic thought. But some inconsistencies are found in his writings, it is because his main aim was not to build a consistent philosophy like vaisnava saints Ramanuja, Vallabhacarya, etc. In-fact, Sankaradeva is known as a religious reformer rather than a philosopher. So he gives much importance on the bhakti marga especially dasya type of bhakti. For him, a devotee is a dasa or servant to his Lord. This type of bhakti needs a personal God who is graceful to his devotees.

Moreover, his concept of God is only an aspect of his philosophy of religion. Through his religion Saṅkaradeva tried to bring spiritual, social and cultural upliftment to the whole society. He himself believed in a lively

relation between God and devotee which necessarily leads to a concept of loving and lovable personal God. His greatest achievement is his success in bringing the people of Assam from a debased form of sakta tantricism to the monotheism of his Vaisnava faith.

Saṅkaradeva not only tried to give a metaphysical description of God, but also wanted to show the close relation between God and man. In Saṅkaradeva's opinion human beings are nothing but appearance of Brahman, but from devotional point of view both God and human beings are very near and dear to each other.

In the present day context, Saṅkaradeva's philosophy as well as his concept of God has great relevance. The religion preached by Sankaradeva was not only a religion but also a socio-cultural force. Through this religion Saṅkaradeva tried to put an end to the rights and rituals and social evils and tried to weed out class related differences between man and man. Now, it is our duty to break the artificial barriers of the different sects, and bring peace and happiness to the society.

#### References:

1. Sankaradeva, Kirtan-Ghosa, vv. 2179-2180
2. Madhavadeva, Rajasuya Kavya p. 4
3. Sankaradeva, Nimanavasiddha - samvada, verses 179-181
4. Borua, B.K., Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam, p.89
5. Sankaradeva, Kirtan-Ghosa, v. 519
6. Sankaradeva, Kirtan-Ghosa, v. 1670
7. Sankaradeva, Kirtan-Ghosa, v. 1829
8. Neog, Maheswar., The Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, p. 244
9. Sankaradeva, Kirtan-Ghosa, v.1