

The Ethico Religious Activity of Philosophy and Its Treatment in the Philosophy of Sankardeva

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ABSTRACT

The article titled, "The ethico religious activity of philosophy and its treatment in the philosophy of Sankardeva" investigates the interplay of ethical and religious dimensions in the philosophy of Sankardeva, a significant figure in the Neo-Vaishnavism movement of medieval Assam. Sankardeva's contributions are examined through his unique integration of philosophical thought with devotional practice, as articulated in his seminal works such as the *Bhakti Ratnakar*, *Borgeets*, and his Assamese adaptation of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Unlike conventional philosophical systems, Sankardeva's approach is deeply embedded in religious and ethical practice, reflecting his commitment to a life of devotion and moral integrity. Philosophy, defined as the rational inquiry into truths and principles, is closely linked to ethics and religion. Thus, Sankardeva's philosophy is situated here within this broader framework, drawing comparisons with other influential thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Swami Vivekananda. Gandhi's emphasis on truth as the essence of religion, Tagore's view of religion as a spontaneous and universal realization, and Vivekananda's perspective on religion as a fundamental human necessity provide context for understanding Sankardeva's innovative contributions. Sankardeva's theological views are rooted in a non-dualistic interpretation of the *Bhagavata Purana*, which emphasizes devotion (*Bhakti*) to the supreme deity Krishna. His philosophy rejects traditional Vedic ritualism and idol worship, advocating instead for a universal, inclusive form of worship embodied in his '*Ek Sarana Nama Dharma*'. This new religious framework, facilitated through the establishment of *Satras* and *Namghars*, aimed to transcend caste barriers and foster social cohesion. The *Satras* functioned as centers for religious and social reform, while the *Namghars* served as community hubs that promoted intellectual, cultural, and moral development. Through creative innovations

in religious practice, including the development of new forms of music, dance, and visual art, Sankardeva sought to awaken the inner potential of individuals and elevate social ethics. His reformist vision not only challenged entrenched religious norms but also laid the foundation for a democratic and egalitarian social order in Assam. This article thus highlights Sankardeva's profound impact on religious philosophy and societal transformation, demonstrating his role in shaping a more inclusive and morally attuned community.

Keywords: *Neo-Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Parinamavada, Satras, Humanism.*

Philosophy being the rational investigation of truths and principles of being, knowledge or conduct; it is very much related to 'Ethics' and 'Religion'. Because, Ethics is a system of moral principles or the rules of conduct recognised in civilised societies in respect of a particular class of human actions or a group of culture; while religion means a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe especially when considered as a creation of a super human agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and rituals observance and often having a moral code for the conduct of human affair. As such the relationship between Philosophy and Ethics, on one hand and Philosophy and Religion on the other is quite obvious. The term 'Religion' has been widely and openly used by different scholars in different senses. Because as Aldous Huxley in his 'Ends and Means' put it – Man live in accordance with their philosophy of life, their conception of the world.' For Mahatma Gandhi, this higher principle is nothing, but 'Truth'. There-fore, for him devotion to truth is religion. He says- "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, it is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost in

order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself.” For Rabindra Nath Tagore, religions are not aimless wondering, the aim of true religion is the realisation of one’s kingship with everything. It is, for him, is a sort of homesickness. He says- ‘No my friends, I shall never be an ascetic....., I shall never leave heart and home and returned into the forest..... thus Tagore insists that true religion should have the quality of spontaneity and neutrality in it. There can not be any compulsion, no fixed limits. It should be free and spontaneous should have the capacity of self-transcendence, the capacity of going beyond him. For Vivekananda, religion is a necessity of life. In the midst of comfort and luxury, men crave for something higher, something better. This craving is the religious craving. According to Vivekananda- as the necessity of life it cannot be given up. Trying to give up religion is itself become a religion. This proves nothing, but its necessity. Again, political and social organisations remain only for sometimes, but religion has continued to live through all circumstances. Thus we see that religion and morality are nothing, but the two sides of the same coin. Morality is the core of religion, the essence of religion. Both are inseparably bound up with each other. Just as water causes the seed to spread and grow, so also religion causes moral sense to grow and develop. There-fore, Gandhi remarks- God is the essential unity of everything. One must go beyond oneself, this act of self transcendence is nothing, but morality. This is possible by loving and serving all.

Sankardeva, the saint, social reformer and preacher of ‘Neo Vaishnavism’ of north east India, is a versatile genius, who contributed to all round development of human life. Sankardeva was never a philosopher nor he preached any philosophy in the ordinary sense of the term. But what he preached is definitely under a system of philosophical out look- The total life of a man. His philosophical ideas and ideals can be located in his ‘Bhakti Ratnakar’ written in Sanskrit and his Borgeets, the ‘Kirtan Ghosha’ and ‘Bhagawata Purana’, Assamese version of the great Srimad Bhagawata Purana. Primarily, he was a preacher of Neo Vaishnavite sect, which declares the supremacy of Lord Krishna. He has given us a new form of universal religion, called ‘Ek Sarana Nama Dharma’, based on the ‘Bhagavat Purana’. Non-dualism is the root of Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavite faith based on ‘Bhakti’ from the ‘Bhagavata Purana’. Perfect Bhakti or sincere devotion to the supreme God can make a

devotee, realise his reality, universality, and divinity. A true devotee need not worship other, except the supreme one ‘Vishnu’ or ‘Krishna’, as called in Hindu religion with a view to getting salvation or ‘Moksha’ from this mortal world. According to Sankardeva’s Brahma is immutable or beyond modification. The world is not unreal. God or Iswara manifest himself in various forms in the world. So, the knowledge of one Brahma can help to know the whole world created from him. Like most of the other Indian philosophers and religious preachers, Sankardeva also spoke of the ‘Maya’. To him- “Bhakati Birodhi Bikhaya Saba Maya” (Borgeet) and ‘Bishaya’ or the worldly pursuits or pleasure which is prejudicial to Bhakti is the Maya. One can get rid off Maya only when one seeks the ‘Sarana’ of Hari. The ‘Jagat’ that is the whole universe is nothing but Maya or the ‘Abidhya’ of Lord Vishnu. One can get rid of it only through devotion to him. Sankardeva and other Vaishnavite writers elaborately asserted that by absolute self surrender to God and by performing all actions in the name of God, one can easily overcome the consequences of all Karmas. Even religious actions done with the selfish motive of gaining worldly pleasure are causes of reward and hence they should be avoided. Sankardeva mentioned Bhakti in Nine different ways such as-

1. Sravana: The act of listening names of God from the lip of a confirmed devotee
2. Kirtana: The act of chanting prayers
3. Smarana: The act of remembering the forms, sports, names of Vishnu
4. Padasavana: The act of serving the fact of the Lord by various devotional ways
5. Archana: The rite of ceremonial or non ceremonial worship
6. Bandana: The act of homage to the Lord
7. Dasya: Worshipping or serving the Lord with the attitude of a faithful and self surrendering servant
8. Sakhya: The sense of friendship between the worshipper and the worshipped
9. Atmanivedana: The complete self surrender which consist of the feeling that one’s body, mind, senses, and the soul are intended for the Bhagavat

Out of these nine ways of devotion, Sravana and Kirtana have been regarded as the highest. So Sankardeva writes, “Yadyapi Bhakati Navavidha

Madhaver, Saravana Kirtana Tato Maha Sresthatar". Upon this religious view of Sankardeva, we see extensive support of 'Parinamavada' of 'Vedanta Darshana', according to which 'Brahma' is both personal or qualified and impersonal or above all qualification. Like Parinamavadins, God is described as qualified being and though non active, yet the master of the world who takes care of all being and destroys the whole world. In 'Kirtana Ghosa', he writes- "You are omniscient, you are the author of all creations, all worship you". Thus Sankardeva has advised in favour of prayer to this 'Supreme Being' who is qualified and unqualified, active and non active, imminent and transcendent, personal and impersonal- all at the same time. He is the cause and the source. Here, lies the greatness of Sankardeva as Parinamavadis. Throughout his religious view, he has established Parinamavada of Vedanta, not the Vivartabada, because in the second Skandha of the 'Srimat bhagawat Gita', which served as the basis of Sankardeva's philosophy of religion. He has attached greatest spiritual value to love, compassion, mercy, etc to his philosophy of religion. But, it was not the intention of Sankardeva to do away with the traditional 'Vedic' rites. He was against idol worship. He characterised his religion as institutional religion by establishing 'Satras and Namghars'. The Satras are like the medieval moths. They were established at places away from the humdrum of life, during his movement from Bardowa to Barpeta. Likewise, Namgharas were set up as Central religious institutions of Satras, established mainly due to religious training. The satra institution is very much interested in the organisation of the villages. From the beginning of the Bhakti movement, it was done through the village Namghars. The Namghars worked to a large extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village. It also served as Panchayat hall where villagers gather to discuss and solved many of their day to day problems. These community centres have been found even to play judicial and political role. The satras and Namghars play an important role in upliftment and betterment of the backward classes, untouchability, and the bordering types of Assam. Sankardeva from the very beginning of his missionary career, led a crusade against caste exclusiveness, untouchability, for a recognised equality of all man, irrespective of caste and character in the eyes of God and exhibited deep sympathy for the lower caste and downtrodden

classes. Thus, through the twin institution of satra and Namghars, Assamese society was organised and the moral tone of the people with such vigilance all around, was found to be very fine indeed. The great movement of Sankardeva, thus brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour. The dignity of individual men as a distinct religious being was declared. Sankardeva's 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' is a democratic religion where all classes of people irrespective of caste, creed, may worship the 'Parama Bramha' or Supreme Lord and get their mental peace. Thus he introduces a casteless, cultural, democratic society in the medieval Assam. His disciple were drawn from all sections of the people living in hills and plains including 'Garos, Mikirs, Nagas, Kacharis, Muslims, etc'. Thus sankardeva propagated his new religion at a time when ritualism was gaining with occasional instructions of ultra religious aximism and occultism. He was logically proceeding against the theological basis of polytheism. Again, with the creation of new type of song, dance, painting, etc, he tried his best to extrovert the inner qualities of man. Throughout his religious life, he wanted to show people the capacity which are hidden in him. He wanted in his religious principles to give people a balance view of life, the dignity of life, and thereby creating a new social order.

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