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HUMANISTIC IDEALS AS REFLECTED IN THE TEACHINGS OF SANKARADEVA

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Introduction:

Srimanta Sankaradeva, a great religious philosopher of medieval period, who propagated the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite cult in Assam, was a humanist in true sense of the term. Sankaradeva was not only a religious leader. He was also a writer, poet, lyricist, composer, playwright, singer, musician, worldly man, ascetic, philosopher, sociologist, scholar and theorist. He was an all-rounder, endowed with all kinds of qualities. He was a theistic humanist who believed in the existence of God. The theistic humanistic philosophers work for the welfare of human being and advise others to do so. Humanism was at the core of Sankaradeva's teachings. His humanistic philosophy was based on religion and spiritualism. Sankaradeva teaches the value of oneness. He announces that there is no diversity in Brahman; it is one, infinite, all-pervasive and it embraces all. Sankaradeva laid great emphasis on human values to strengthen the spirit of unity among the people.

Key Words: Humanism, Sankaradeva, Neo-Vaiṣṇavite, ideology, value

Objective of the paper:

The objective of writing this paper is to explore the humanistic perspectives in the teachings of Sankaradeva.

Significance of the Study:

Sankaradeva's teachings include praying to one God, treating all beings equally, uniting all people irrespective of caste, region, colour and creed. Sankaradeva is relevant for the humanitarian point of view embedded in his religious ideology. He played an important role in strengthening the nation-building process in Assam. Considering the multidimensional roles played by Sankaradeva for the development of Assamese society, the need is felt to explore his humanitarian ideologies prevailed in the teachings of Sankaradeva.

Methodology of the Study:

Basically this is a theoretical research paper based on secondary sources of data. The relevant data have been collected from different books, research papers, articles published in journals, magazines etc. Descriptive method has been adopted to analyze the collected data.

Humanistic outlook in the teachings of Sankaradeva:

Sankaradeva has an incredible contribution to the social, cultural and spiritual identity of Assam. About 560 years ago, Assam was in the midst of a complex religious, political, social, economic and cultural chaos that it was very difficult for the common man to get rid of it easily. Worship of various deities, alms-giving, polytheism, sacrifice, feasting, etc. The Assamese people were scattered in almost all directions. At such a critical moment, Mahapurusa Srimanta Sankaradeva awaken the people with the sense of humanity.

Humanism means service to human beings or the welfare of human beings. The implication of humanism lies in its ability to devote itself to creation for the betterment of human beings, regardless of race or creed, beyond all forms of narrowness and insignificance. Humanism is, in fact, a form of protest, which can start a revolution against the prevailing social order to rescue human beings from any adversity. The name of this kind of new revolution is apparently humanism. The humanist ideology reflected in the writings of Sankaradeva is also a form of protest. All of his writings show that the triumph of humanism was hidden in his

ideas. Sankaradeva dreamed of establishing peace and harmony in society through the establishment of human values. He established religious unity among the masses as a means to eradicate caste discrimination and establish absence of untouchability, non-exploitation and cosmopolitanism. In addition to preaching the religion, Sankaradeva emphasized the purity of the human mind, which is the first condition of humanism. According to him, love is the greatest asset of the human heart. In order to be the possessor of this asset, human beings have to treat all animals equally. It is important to avoid upper-lower discrimination and move beyond arrogance. He believed that the whole world could be conquered by love.

Sankaradeva knew that Brahmanical pretensions have raised a barrier between man and God, so he endeavored to break down all prejudices of caste, creed and rank. His teachings embrace each and every one of society irrespective of caste, creed, religion, rich-poor. In *Kirtana-ghoṣa*, he says:

*nahi bhakatita jati ajati vicar
krsnata bhakati samastare adhikār (Kirtana-ghosa)*

In *bhakti* there is no distinction of castes, everybody has equal right to chant the Hari-nama. He simplified religion to such an extent that even the most ignorant and the humblest of all could join religious worship. *Mahapurusiya dharma* is another name for this faith, because Sankaradeva's object of worship, the all pervasive *Parama Brahman*, to whom the devotee is to take shelter, is so described in the *Bhagavata*. It had universal appeal, and, therefore, people of all castes could embrace it. Major portion of Sankaradeva's literature is of humanistic value, what has been reflected in two different ways. In one way he clearly expresses the humanism in own words and the other by the help of other means, such as:

*jati ajati ekove nobache
henase harira nam |
papara agani dharma siromoni
jani bola ram ram ||¹*

(The name of Hari does not discriminate caste or creed; the said name being the supreme of religion, burns all sins, so chant the holy name.)

Sankaradeva was a thinker for the wellbeing of mankind. In his thought processes the welfare of mankind play roles as the dominating feature. The *Eka-Saraṇa-Harinama-Dharma* propounded by him has ingredients of human and democratic values. Irrespective of being male, female, teen or old, anyone can go for it. The so-called untouched one can also come to this faith. In Sankaradeva's literature this sort of human and democratic ideals can be seen, such as:

*stri balya brdha samastare adhikar |
candalako kare name tekhane uddhar ||²*

(Women, children and aged one, all have the right to chant the name of Hari. Even it redeems the *candala* (a low classed one).

Sankaradeva also appealed to be kind to the other creatures. God is the creator of all animals and plants, what he had expressed in his writing giving a reference of Krsna made before Uddhava :

*samasta bhutate byapi achu mai hari |
savako maniba tumi bisnubudhi kari ||³*

(I am all- pervading in creatures. Look my presence in all and feel Godliness in them)

Sankaradeva gives more importance towards human beings. Krsna told Uddhava to pay more respect to human being like God than other creatures:

*bisesata manusya ganata yito nare |
bisnubudhibhave sarbadaye manya kare ||
irisa asuya tiraskara ahankar |
save nasta hovai tebe tavaksane tar ||⁴*

(The man who treat human being as God, all kinds of evil thoughts disappear from that time) Only human being can lead spiritual as well as religious life, but the animals cannot. The statement of Krsna carries the sense of humanity, so Sankaradeva, rightly quoted the same.

The humanity of Sankaradeva is not only confined within mankind, but also extended to all birds and animals including movable and immovable. Taking all these in the ambit of his literature, he developed a high sense of philosophy. Thus he says:

*yata jiba jangama kita patangama
aga naga jaga teri kaya* ⁵

(All movable and immovable including the worms, insects etc are thus the body of thee)

Sankaradeva also appealed to be kind to the other creatures. God is the creator of all animals and plants, what he had expressed in his writing.

Human is also a part of nature, Sankaradeva, therefore, tried to educate from nature. All men can not behave in equal manner, but the nature does not discriminate the pious or the cruel. He pointed towards the plants and creepers in *Brndabana* :

*brndabane achai yata tarugaṇ |
dekha dekha kena mahasādhura laksaṇ ||
karai para upakāra kino kṛpamay |
pararese arthe jive iṭo brksacay* ⁶

(The creepers and plants are there in *Brndabana* casting shadows to all like virtuous do good to all). The expression of thought about nature's bounty, add more values in Sankaradeva's humanism.

The humanistic approach was the underlying meaning of Sankaradeva's monotheism, by which he was able to unite the people of different faiths. He derived the tenet of *Eka Sarana* (taking shelter in one) from *Srimad Bhagavata Puraṇa*. In *Gita Krsna* advised Arjuna:

*sarvadharmā parityajya mamekaṁ saranam brajā |
ahṅ tvān sarva papebhyo moksisāmi mā sucah* ⁷

(Giving up all dharmas (righteous or unrighteous actions), come unto me alone for refuge. I shall free you from all sins, no need to become upset.) Sankaradeva described the above said verse in his own words as follows:

*sarva dharma eri eka sarana saksat |
sudrha bisvase sakhi laiyoka ahmata ||
nakariba bhay hera karo angikara |
samaste papate mai karibo nistara* ⁸

(Take shelter in me giving up all other faiths, I shall redeem you from all kind of sins, do not worry. Krsna instructed Arjuna to give up all other dharmas such as deity worship, animal sacrifice etc and asked him to have firm faith in Supreme Being. Having said this, Sankaradeva envisaged for a classless society, which signifies the humanistic values and ethos.

Sankaradeva's aim of building a society was based on non violence; in as much as, non-violence is the main ingredient of humanism. Although, Sankaradeva was very strict in principle, but he always advised his disciples to be tolerant to others who have faith in other religion and culture. This is what Krsna said to Arjuna :

*parara dharmaka nihinsiba kadacita |
kariba bhutaka daya sakaruṇa citta ||
huiba santa citta sarba dharmata batsala |
ehi bhagavata dharma jana mahabala* ⁹

(Don't be jealous of any other religion; be kind to all being and other's religion too, these are the qualities of *Bhagawata dharma*)

Sankaradeva had his vision to build a peaceful and prosperous society eradicating the evils like violence, hatred etc. Being away from these evils, one should feel the existence of God in every individual, only then, a peaceful society can be expected:

*hena jani asura svabhava save eri |
samasta pranika puja bisnu budhi kari* ¹⁰

(Knowing it well give up the demon like behaviour and feel the God in every one and respect all.)

Sankaradeva believed that for a peaceful society each one has to have good will to other. The qualities like kindness, compassion, tolerance etc. aid in building up a good society. Everyone should love and respect each other. Sankaradeva referred to such human qualities:

*eka prana huya asradha asuya
eriba karkasa bada |
anyao anye rati anyao anye priti
kariba ati ahlada* ¹¹

(Feel oneness in all, leave all kinds of hatred and rudeness, love and respect to one another.)

Castism is far remote to Humanism. In Indian context, Sankaradeva was not in favour of caste systems that prevail over. It is better known that Brahmana, Ksyatriya, Baisya, and Sudra were the categories which classified on the basis of qualities and deeds. According to Sankaradeva, it should not be determined on the basis of birth, but by qualities and capacities. There is no class or caste system in his *Bhakti Dharma*. One who indulge in *Bhakti Dharma*, he need not be even a Brahmin :

*krsnar kathata yito rasika |
brahmana janma tara lagai kika ||
smaroka mātra hari dine rati |
nabacai bhakati jati ajati ||*¹²

(One who inculcates interest in Hari, why he needs to be a Brahmin. He only should remember Hari, and no need to think about caste and out caste.) So he clearly said that even a lowest one also fit to be adored like a priest. As custom and tradition, only Brahmins are allowed to perform sacrificial ceremonies. Sankaradeva, did not believe in that, rather he emphasized qualities and capacities, thus he said:

*yara nama laile matra yajna karibara patra
hovai ati mlechca antyajati ||*¹³

(Even he may be of mlechha (so-called low-caste), but if he is devotee of Hari, he is eligible to be a priest.)

In Indian tradition Brahmins are considered as privileged class and Sudras including some tribes are treated as low-classed people. But in some scriptures there are some contradictory versions too. Krsna at the twilight of his departure told Uddhava not to discriminate amongst Brahmin and Candal (live in cremation ground). Men behave differently owing to their qualities and capacities that is why all should be treated as human being irrespective of caste and creed:

*brahmanara candalara nibicari kula |
datata corata jara drṣṭi ekatula ||*¹⁴

(Don't look at the caste of either Brahmin or Candal. Look equally even to donor and stealer (because Hari dwells in all)

Sankaradeva attempted to assimilate the tribal's of North-east and tried to give one platform. There was definitely a humanistic approach that united all into one. The example of exertion in his literature as such: Kirata, kachari, Khachi, Garu, Miri, yavan, Kanka, Govala, Ahom, Dhoba, Turuka, Kuvasa, Mleccha (all tribes) and others accompanying the devotees of Kṛṣṇa get devotion and obtain salvation.¹⁵ Sankaradeva aimed at a classless society of human value. Whereas, *Bhakti* is the focal point of his faith and culture, which he propagate in a democratic way. By dint of Sankaradeva's democratic role, those who were neglected by the high-class brāhimins, could come closer to each other and could sit together, eat together, pray together. This certainly speaks of democratic thought of Sankaradeva.

Conclusion:

The concept of humanism is related to the all round development of personality and individual talents. Human welfare takes place when the individuals in the society understand each other. A proper understanding brings cooperation which leads to unity and unity is the main key for bringing human welfare anywhere in the earth. Sankaradeva was a social reformer, and as such he strived for the welfare of the common people irrespective of caste and creed. Sankaradeva's concept of oneness taught avoiding discrimination among fellow beings and cultivating a feeling of cooperation. According to him, when people are illumined with the light of unity, the idea of otherness disappears. His humanistic ideal is free from discriminations based on race, colour, nationality and language. Sankaradeva's humanism embraces all living beings and not just human beings alone as is clear from his teachings.

From the above discussion it has been observed that Sankaradeva has talked about all the aspects related to the concept of humanity. Sankaradeva included all those principles and elements which established his concept of humanism as a well equipped, refined and beneficial concept for the entire human society. Hence, the humanistic philosophy of Sankaradeva should remain as the most acceptable theory and practice among the people of the entire globe.

The Eka-Sarana-Harinama-Dharma of Sankaradeva on one hand bestowed the folk society with humanistic values and on the other hand by eliminating the feeling of inferiority from the deprived, neglected section of the society. He infused courage in them to live along with the rest of society by maintaining equal rights and equal mentality. The positivity aroused in the life of people by Sankaradeva's ideology of religious

philosophy and humanitarianism in the fifteenth-sixteenth century has been instrumental later in the formation of the larger Assamese society

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