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A BRIEF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF VAISNAVISM OF SANKARDEVA AND MAHAPRABHU CHAITANYA

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Introduction:

Vaisnavism is one of the oldest living religions of India, where Visnu also called Hari, Narayana, Krishna etc., is worshipped as the supreme God. It is not possible to determine how old it is, but it is certain that the sources of Vaisnavism may be traced back to the *Vedas* and the *Upanisads*. The word 'Vaisnava' means 'relating to Visnu' or a 'follower of Visnu', who is one of the important *Vedic* gods.¹ 'Visnu' is a *Rig Vedic* Deity who attained great prominence in the later *Vedic* period and came to be referred to as the great God or Sole God. In the *Bhagavatgita* and the *Bhagavata-Purana* Vaisnavism finds its best exposition through the person of Lord Krishna, the perfect incarnation of Visnu's assuming different forms of Incarnations (avatara) from time to time is an important feature of the Visnu-cult.² The word Vaisnava in the sense of sect of religion is not to be found either in the *Vedic* literature or the principal *Upanisads*. The word 'Vaisnava' in the sense of a sect of religion is found only in the latest part of *Mahabharata*.³

There are various traditional Vaisnavite sects in India; established respectively by Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhava, and Vallabha. Although Vallabha was a contemporary of Chaitanya, yet the sect established by him is counted among the traditional sects of Vaisnavism, where as the sect established by the latter is not. The Vaisnavism promulgated by Chaitanya and Sankaradeva is called neo-Vaisnavism, differing from the traditional forms of Vaisnavism in both theory and practice.

Sankaradeva, the great genius, prophet, seer and founder of Bhakti movement in Assam, had a deep impression on Assamese culture and literature, Neo-Vaisnavite religion and way of life. He was born in (1449-1569 A.D.) in the village of Alipukhuri of Bardowa in the District of Nagaon, Assam. His father was Kusumbar

¹ Banerjee Nikunja Vihari, Chaitanya and Vaisnavism, P. 46

² Chaliha Bhaba Prasad, A note on Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaisnavism and His Philosophical view (Mahapurusa Jyoti, Vol. 5) .P 109

³ "Astadasa Purananan Sravand Yat Phalam Bhavet, tet Phalam Samva Pronati Vaisanavo Natra Samsayah" - Mahabharata, XVIII, 6.96.

Shiromoni Bhuyan and mother Satyasandha who died after his birth. At this stage his grandmother Kherswuti brought him up. It is said that Kusumber was offering worship to Lord Siva with a view of having the boon of a child from the easy-to-satisfy God⁴. In his own days Sankara used to celebrate the glory of Lord Rama and Krishna in songs and to narrate their stories according to the wish of his chief disciples.

The school of Bengal Vaisnavism of Chitanya (1485-1533 A.D) was known as Achintyabhedabheda or Identity-in-difference the nature of which is essentially indescribable and unthinkable due to the unthinkable power of God. Historically the school is associated with Madhavism and is also called Madhva-Gaudiya school. But on account of certain fundamental philosophical differences with Madhavism, it should be regarded as an independent school. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu wrote no works. His disciple Shri Rupa Gosvami has written Ujjavalanilamani and Bhaktirasamrta-sindhu. Shri Jiva Gosvami has commented on both these works and has written his great work Satsandarbha together with its running commentary, Sarvasamvadini. Baladeva Vidyabhusana has written a commentary on the Brahmasutra called Govindabhasya, the introduction of which is known as Siddhantaratra. Rupa and Jiva and Baladeva have furnished philosophical basis for the teachings of Chaitanya which are mainly based on Bhagavata.⁵

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are:

- (i) To attempt to reveal the introduction of Vaisnavism.
- (ii) To attempt to explain Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva.
- (iii) To attempt to reveal the Vaisnavism of Chaitanya.
- (iv) To explain the Comparison of Sankaradeva and Chaitanya Vaisnavism.

Methodology:

The method of the present study is analytical in nature which is based on the primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources contain books, journals, leaflet, data collection from website documents published from research institutes. Books, particularly on the Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and Chaitanya are supplied a greater source of information.

Primary data collected by the meeting of some social workers and also in interview with renowned persons helped fruitful analysis and authenticity of the topic. Secondary datas are mainly applied in this topic.

Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva:

The philosophical basis of Sankaradeva's religion, historically speaking, is the culmination of Bhakti movement of Northern India. Like Ramanuja, Sankaradeva also holds that God is the central Reality of soul and matter and neither can exist without Him. They exist in Him and are inseparable. In Kirtana- Ghosha, he writes:

Krishnara carana cintiveka hridayata

Asanta Isvara Hari samasta bhutata

Think of Krishna's feet in thine heart,

Knowest thou that God is in the heart of all.

⁴Neog Maheswar, Sankaradeva, P.6

⁵ Sharma Chandradhar, A Critical survey of Indian Philosophy (Edit-1991), Motilal Banarsidass Publishers' PVT. LTD., Delhi-07, P-380

On the metaphysical plane, Sankaradeva holds a non-dualistic standpoint, unlike many of his Vaisnava counter-parts in the rest of India. This explains the absence of dual-images in his religion such as Radha-Krishna of Chaitanya, Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacharya, Rukmini-Krishna of Namadeva and Sita-Ram of Ramananda. He gives an unambiguous expression of this faith:

Prakriti Purusa duiro niyanta Madhava

Samastare atma Hari parama bandhava

Madhava is the guide of both Prakriti (Matter) and Purusha (Mind);

Hari is the most faithful friend of all.

Sankaradeva accepts as ultimate three kinds of substance, matter (acit), soul (cit) and God (Isvara). According to him, the subtle jivas and the subtle material powers of the universe emanate from Paramatman, from whom both the conscious and the unconscious parts of the universe sprung forth.⁶

Sankaradeva disparagingly refers to religio-philosophical works which confound men's minds and lead them to believe that Brahman is form-less.⁷ But nirakara, 'form-less', is an epithet very often applied to Brahman or Bhagavat. Madhavadeva has the following explanation for this:

As Hari is devoid of forms coming out of matter (prakrita akara), Isvara holds the name Nirakara (formless).⁸

In the cosmic pattern of Sankaradeva, though Jivatma emanates from Paramatma, both are not conceived as identical and co-extensive. They have their independent entities. This subtle difference between the two is explained thus:

"He is the Lord (Isa), under whose control is maya; it is the individual Jiva that is under the suppression of maya. (The former is) ever attended with supreme bliss, (while the other is) attended with great afflictions. Isvara is in the embrace of delight giving intelligence (hladini samvid), is eternal, conscious and blissful (sac-cit-ananda) and the individual is crushed under dire nescience (avidya) and is the repository of mass of afflictions."⁹

In the cosmology of Sankaradeva, God is the absolute reality. He is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the universe. He is endowed with all auspicious and excellent attributes which are unsurpassable. Sankaradeva considers the Absolute Brahman as Narayana, the only object of adoration. In Kirtana he states—

Prathame pranamo Brahmarupi sanatana

Sarva avatarar karana Narayana .¹⁰

"At the outset, I bow down to Narayana, the Eternal One, in the form of Brahma, the cause of all incarnations"¹¹

⁶ Barua, Birinchi Kumar, Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam, Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, Gauhati, Assam, 1960, P.p.87-88

⁷ Anadi-patana, 157; Maheswar Neog, Sankaradeva and His Times, Department of Publication Gauhati University, 1965, P. 232

⁸ Namaghosa, 162, Maheswar Neog, ibid P. 232

⁹ Barua, Birinchi Kumar, ibid, P-89

¹⁰ Kirtana Aru Namaghosa, Duttabarua Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. Ghy-1, P.1

¹¹ Barua, Birinchi Kumar, ibid, P.91

Sankaradeva mentions the four presiding deities of manas, buddhi, ahankara and citta, who are Candra (the moon), Brahma, Rudra and Vasudeva respectively. He adds that one, whose mind takes absolute refuge in Krishna (Vasudeva), secures easy release from *samsara*.¹² The Bhagavata or Vasudeva cult, which believes in the four vyuhas or worshipful forms of God, sees in these four categories Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Samkarsana and Vasudeva.¹³

Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to One, Vasudeva Krishna, also as Vishnu, Narayana, Rama, Hari and therefore, his creed is known as Ekasaniya nama dharma. He upheld the philosophy of oneness in all. He comprehended one God, Krishna, one service, the service of Krishna, the supreme Brahma. The worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. This has been made clear by Krishna in the Bhakti-pradipa:

Eka cite tumi moka matra kara seva,

Parihara durate yateka ana deva.

Huyoka saranapanna eka mote matra,

Moke bhaja huiba teve mukutira patra.

Nama nusuniba tumi ana devatara,

Yena mate nuhibe bhakati vyabhicara.

“Devote yourself to me with a single mind,

Forsake from a distance all other gods.

Surrender yourself to me alone,

Devote to me, then will you be fit for salvation.

Never listen to names of other gods,

That your devotion may remain unsullied.”¹⁴

In the Nama-ghosha, his beloved disciple Madhavadeva speaks of the following ten avatars:

Matsya Kurma Narasimha

Vamana Parasurama

Halirama Varaha Srirama

Buddha Kalki name dasa

Akriti dharica Krishna

¹² Anadi-patana, 72-74, Maheswar Neog, ibid, P.238

¹³ Bhag.-p., III. 26.21, 25, 28. The purana here counts only three vyuhas and avoids Pradyumna as desires, for which he stands, are simply functions of the manas. Cf. Sridhara on Bhag.-p., III. 26.21: adhi-bhuta-rupena tasyaiva mahan iti samjna, adhyatma-rupena cittam iti, upasya-rupena vasudeva iti, adhithata tu tasya ksetrajnah: evamahankare samkarsana upasyah, rudro'dhithata; manasyaniruddha upasyah, candro'dhithata; buddhau pradyumna upasyah, brahmadhithata jnatavyam. & Maheswar Neog, ibid, P. 238-239

¹⁴ Barua, Birinchi Kumar, ibid, P.p.92-93

Taju pave karaho pranama

Krishna was regarded by Sankaradeva as the highest, best and the most ideal divinity. His appearance in the form of Vishnu-Narayana in the celestial Vaikuntha with His liberated devotees and attendants is the supreme manifestation¹⁵.

Vaisnavism of Mahaprabhu Chaitanya:

According to Chaitanya, God is free from all differences-homogeneous, heterogeneous and internal, and yet He really manifests Himself as the world and the souls through His powers which are identical and yet different from Him. In Himself, He is efficient cause of universe, while in association with His powers, He is the material cause.¹⁶

His inner power which forms His essence is called Antaranga Svarupa Shakti and manifests itself as threefold power-as Sandhini which is Sat or Existence, as Samvit which is Chit or Knowledge, and as Hladini which is Ananda and Bliss. The power through which he manifests Himself in the form of the atomic souls is called Tatastha Shakti or Jiva Shakti. The power through which He manifests Himself as the material world is called Maya Shakti and it is said to be His external power (Bahiranga Shakti). God as Bliss is qualified, while all His powers are His qualifications or manifestations. The atomic souls are innumerable and remain distinct even in liberation. They emanate from Him, like rays from the Sun, and are absolutely dependent on Him. The world is the manifestation of His external power and is not false. The impurities and defects of the world do not affect Him at all. In liberation, the wrong notions and the ignorance of the soul vanish, though the world as power of God remains.¹⁷

“Violence and tyranny are absent in the spiritual world, so sincerely cry out for Krishna’s help and constantly think of Him. When you are released from this prison, neither return to your old materialistic ways, nor associate with degraded or sinful people, because one can never cultivate love for the Supreme Lord, Krishna, by living a mundane life. You should know that Krishna is unobtainable for the materialistic person.”¹⁸

Bhakti is the sole means of liberation. It is of two kinds-Vidhibhakti, which is according to the Vedas and Shastras, and Ruchibhakti or affection. Bhakti is the affection service of God for His sake alone.¹⁹ Ruchi or Raganuga Bhakti is the end. It consists in the intense spiritual love for God like that of the Gopis and culminates in the love of Radha. Radha is the infinite power of Krishna. To love God as one’s lover and to regard oneself as the beloved of God consists in the eternal enjoyment of this blissful love for Krishna in His Nityavrindavanadhama.²⁰ There is no difference between power and the possessor of power. Krishna is full of pure consciousness, infinity joy and bliss. He is the infinite possessor of power. He is the abode contrary qualities. He is infinite, and yet he incarnates as a finite mortal. He is absolutely independent, and yet he is subject to love. Sweetness of Krishna attracts all men and women towards him by its inherent power. He constantly endeavors to make them taste the nectar of his infinite sweetness. Pure love (prema) binds man to God. It is unconditioned. It does not seek selfish pleasure. It seeks only the pleasure of God. The devotee has instinctive love for him. His pure love transcends all moral observances and rituals.²¹

¹⁵ Barua, Birinchi Kumar, *ibid*, P.p-93-94

¹⁶ Sharma Chandradhar, *ibid*, P-380

¹⁷ Sharma Chandradhar, *ibid*, P.p-380-381

¹⁸ Dasa Sriman Sarvabhavana (trans), Dasa Sriman Kesidamana, (ed.), *Srila Vrindavana dasa Thakura, Sri Caitanya-bhagavata* (Complete Edition), Rasbihari Lal & Sons, P.194

¹⁹ *Anyabhilasitashunyam Jnanakarmadyanavrtam. Anukulyena Krsna Nusevanam bhaktir uttama, Bhaktirasamrtasindhu, I, 1, 9.*

²⁰ Sharma Chandradhar, *ibid*, P-381

²¹ *Ibid, Adilila, Ch. IV., Sinha, Jadunath, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, Central, Calcutta-26, P.p-465-466*

Caitanya explains the means of attaining the highest good in course of his conversation with Raya Ramananda. The performance of duties relating to castes and stages of life leads to devotion God. Complete dedication of all works to God is superior to the performance of works. Renunciation of one's specific duties and complete surrender to God are superior to it. Devotion mixed with knowledge is superior to it, Higher than this pure devotion unmixed with knowledge. Devotion in the form of love is the best means to the highest Good. Servitude, friendship, tender affection, and love of a wife for a husband are the best means to attainment of God. There are various means to it. There are various degrees of attainment of him. Different aspirants have different aptitudes for different kinds of sadhana. They are the best for them. Wifely love contains the excellences of the other kinds of love for God. Complete attainment of God is possible through it.²²

Krishna resides in the highest heaven which is beyond prakrti. He is infinite, ubiquitous, and possessed of devine qualities. He is unconditioned (turiya) and free from all traces of maya. He is manifested in Vasudeva, Samkarsana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha. He has unconceivable power (acintyasakti). He is in the world, and yet not in it. The world is in him, and yet not in him. He is transecent and immanent. His powers are inconceivable.²³

God is like the blazing sun. The Jiva is a spark of him. The souls issue forth from his soul-energy (jivashakti). He is the possessor of this power. The Jiva is a power of God, and yet different from him. It is an eternal servant of him. It forgets its essential divine nature, and is entangled in bondage to maya. Devotion (bhakti) to God only disentangles him from the bondage, and leads him to attain him. If a person surrenders himself to God completely, he breaks the fetters of maya. The jivas are parts of God different from him (Vibhinnamsa). But the four Vyuhās and Avatars are his own parts (svamsa) non-different from him.²⁴

Virtue (dharma), wealth (artha), happiness (kama), liberation (moksa), and love of God (prema) are the five ends of life. The first four are worthless in comparison with the last. Love of God is the fifth supreme end. It is the ocean of infinite bliss of God. The bliss of Brahman, the impersonal Absolute, is not even a drop of this ocean of love of God. It can be attained by reciting and chanting his name.²⁵ Ignorance (avidya) of the jiva is destroyed by the grace of God, which reveals the nature of the reality. He can be known in his real nature by devotion. He can be known as Brahman only through knowledge. Brahman is an impact manifestation of God.²⁶ Karma, yoga, and knowledge lead to devotion. They cannot lead to attainment God without devotion of him. Knowledge leads to liberation. Knowledge without devotion is not pure.²⁷ Devotion is sweet. Knowledge is bitter. Devotion or love is the best means of the attainment of God. It is the essence of the bliss of God. A devotee does not want liberation or union with God. He wants to serve and love him forever. God is the embodiment of transcendent beauty. He is the repository of all kinds of sentiments (rasamrta). He is the object of devotion of the different kinds of devotees.²⁸

Comparative Study of Sankaradeva and Chaitanya's Vaisnavism:

Both Sankaradeva and Chaitanya believed that Krishna is the supreme God. He is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. Krishna is sat,cit and ananda. The duty of man is to worship Krishna. Worship of many gods and goddesses are prohibited in their religious thought. But difference between Sankaradeva and Chaitanya is that Sankaradeva believes one and only one God i.e. Krishna, but Chaitanya believes dual-image

²²Caitanyacaritamṛta, *ibid.*, Ch. VIII., Sinha, Jadunath, *ibid.*, P-465

²³ *Ibid*, *Adilila*, Ch. V., Sinha, Jadunath, *ibid.*, P-466

²⁴ *Ibid*, *Madhyalila*, Ch-XXII, Sinha, Jadunath, *ibid.*, P-466

²⁵ *Ibid*, *Adilila*, Ch. VII.

²⁶ *Ibid*, *Adilila*, Ch. I.

²⁷ *Ibid*, *Madhyalila*, Ch-XXII

²⁸ *Ibid*, *Madhyalila*, Ch-VIII, Sinha, Jadunath, *ibid.*, Pp-466-467

i.e. Radha and Krishna. Radha is the infinite power of Krishna. So, both should be worshiped, owing to Chaitanya.

Conclusion:

Finally, we come to the conclusion that Vaisnavism is the religion which believed that Vishnu is the Supreme God. This religious believe and practices are found in *Vedas* and *Upanisad*. Traditional vaisnavite religion reveals in the thought of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhava, Vallabha and the neo-vaisnavite religion reveals in the thought of Chaitanya and Sankaradeva.

Sankaradeva believes one and only one God i.e. Krishna. According to him, Krishna is the supreme God. He is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipresent and the principal cause of the universe. Ekasaraniya nama dharma should be our main religious believe and practice. He strictly opposed the worship of many gods and goddesses. Chaitanya also believes Krishna as like as Sankaradeva. But the difference is that Chaitanya believes dual-image i.e. Radha-Krishna in their religious worship and practices.

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