

## HUMANISM IN SANKARADEVA'S PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** *The word Humanism is derived from the word 'Human' with the suffix 'ism'. The meaning of the word 'Humanism' formed by Human and ism is a system of thought that regards humans as capable to live their lives, rather than relying on religious beliefs (Oxford Dictionary). Sankaradeva a great religious philosopher of medieval period, who propagated the Neo-Vaishnavite cult in Assam, was a humanist in true sense of the term. 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 tries to break up all types of classifications amongst men and to establish unity, happiness and universality exhibited by nature. Sankaradeva was a social reformer, and as such he strived for the welfare of the common people abjuring the distinction of caste and creed. Sankaradeva was praising humanism to propagate the universal religion in a scientific way in a society full of superstition, evil rites and inhuman activities. Sankaradeva took Kṛṣṇa Culture as the main foundation to establish humanistic religion and philosophy. He was of the view that without purity of heart no outward custom and tradition can establish men as real one and he had a firm and deep faith on it. Sankaradeva's humanism can be considered as creative humanism which adopts a secular outlook by emphasizing upon the reformation of individual first and from this reformation the human society can be gradually reformed.*

**Key words:** spiritualism, creative humanism, unity, kṛiṣṇa culture.

### I.

The word Humanism is derived from the word 'Human' with the suffix 'ism'. The word 'Human' originates from the Latin word 'Human' and the suffix 'ism' comes from Greek word 'ismos' (Oxford Dictionary). The meaning of the word 'Humanism' formed by Human and ism 'is a system of thought that regards humans as capable to live their lives, rather than relying on religious beliefs (Oxford Dictionary).

Humanism is defined as any system of thought or action which is concerned with mere human interest or with that of the human race in general. In other words, any quality related to human welfare, or anything that leads to the growth and development of human virtues and values falls under the purview of humanism. The word humanism comes from the Latin word 'Human' which implies a search for perfection of the human soul and development of the full potential of a man. Humanism signifies that in each human soul there is a great power which can be awakened and inspired to reach the ideal of perfection.

The concept of humanism is directly related to the peaceful existence of human beings and the up growth of human goals and values. It is also related to the all round development of personality and individual talents. Any activity related to human welfare can be included within the term humanism. Human welfare takes place when the individuals in the society understand each other, and this process continues. A proper understanding brings cooperation which leads to unity and unity is the main key for bringing human welfare anywhere in the world.

## II.

Sankaradeva is considered as the living force of Assamese culture. He emerged from a period of socio-political crisis. Like the prevalent Indian thought of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sankaradeva's philosophy is spiritual and revolutionary. His philosophy is characterized by its suggestivity, profundity and humanistic appeal. A lively blend of spiritualism and pragmatism is vividly discerned in his thought. Though his thoughts not very rich in logical subtleties and dialectical skill, yet its humanistic approach is vibrant with creativity.

Sankaradeva, a great religious philosopher of medieval period, who propagated the Neo-Vaishnavite cult in Assam, was a humanist in true sense of the term. Sankaradeva was the artist, the social reformer, the preacher of 'Eka Sarana Harinama Dharma'. 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. Ripeness of human soul is their ultimate end.

## III.

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. In the light of this philosophy, he tries to break up all types of classifications amongst men and to establish unity, happiness and universality exhibited by nature.

Sankaradeva was a social reformer, and as such he strived for the welfare of the common people abjuring the distinction of caste and creed. Through the concept of oneness he gave a clarion call to the society for unity amongst the fellow beings. 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 vanishes. His humanistic ideal is free from discriminations based on race, colour, nationality and language as is warranted by his this kind of thinking. Sankaradeva's humanism embraces all living beings and not just human beings alone as is clear from his teachings. In "Kirtana Ghosa" Sankaradeva said:

*"Xakala pranika dekhibeka atmasam  
Kukura srgala gardabharo atma rama  
Janiya savako pari kariba pranama"*  
(Kirtan ghosa /1825)

Sankaradeva was praising humanism to propagate the universal religion in a scientific way in a society full of superstition, evil rites and inhuman activities. Sankaradeva took Kṛṣṇa Culture as the main foundation to establish humanistic religion and philosophy. He was of the view that without purity of heart no outward custom and tradition can establish men as real one and he had a firm and deep faith on it. According to Sankaradeva, man has to gather force from within to love man as man, and to see his own image in every creature. For this exercise of Kṛṣṇa Culture is essential to achieve. Sankaradeva firmly declared that the selfless path paved with the mahamantra of Kṛṣṇa's name will make one to see in all creatures. Exercise of Kṛṣṇa Culture make the soul beautiful and then one will see the world beautiful and also one can arrive at the highest peak of humanism if such kind of situation arises.

Sankaradeva's humanism can be said to be creative humanism in the sense that his humanism is of and about man and his self-exceeding power. So everything concerning man's exalting power marking novelty and his milieu may be branded as creative humanism. It displays a constructive spirit in the reformulation of human values both ethical and aesthetic for the elevation of both individual and collective life. The main objective of creative humanism is to serve humanity which has a universal appeal. It promotes altruistic love to embrace the whole of humanity without bothering for castes, colour and classes. Sankaradeva through his writings promoted love, brotherhood, and fellow-feeling among the various people from various sections of the society. Faith, hope and fidelity are some significant features of creative humanism. Faith on higher nature of humanity, hope for a

better future and fidelity as a pre-condition for the promotion of universal brotherhood are the cardinal features of Sankaradeva's philosophy.

Sankaradeva under the influence of Kṛṣṇa Culture has termed all creatures, high or low, men or women, dog and jackal as having or possessing the soul of the supreme. There is no distinction between brahman and chandala (untouchables) and between high caste and low caste in the humanistic philosophy of Sankaradeva. According to Sankaradeva, the lover of God is the man of high rank, no matter to which caste he belongs. He appeared to the human being to cross the barrier of casteism deep-rooted in society from the days of ancient India. Sankaradeva was of the view that devotion makes no distinction between caste and uncaste. He said,

*“brahmanara chandalara nibicari kula  
Datata corata yena dṛṣṭi ektula  
Nicata sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana  
Tahakese pandita buliya sarvvajana”  
(Kirtan ghosa /1821)*

Sankaradeva was advocating for giving equal amount of attention to donors and thieves, and same kind of regards for the pious and the mean and if such a person lives, he is called really wise by all men. A society which is deeply rooted in evil custom and superstition is not going to give equal status to the low born people or caste. He was of the opinion that through humanistic philosophy the low born will be sublimated with companion of the honest people.

*“kirata kachari                      khaki garo miri  
Javan kanka govala  
Asama maluka                      dhoba je turuka  
Kubaca mlecha candela  
Ano papi nara                      kṛṣṇa sevakara  
Sangata pavitra haya”  
(Bhagawat 2/53, 54)*

The kiratas, the kachari, the khaci, the Garos, the Misings, the Javanas, the Ahoms etc. and other sinful people become purified in the company of the devotees of Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, Sankaradeva was advising us to be the servant of Kṛṣṇa, get His blessings and do His deeds.

Sankaradeva had a vision to establish a society free from all social prejudices. The stigma of untouchability and casteism which crippled the entire Assamese society in the 15<sup>th</sup>

century deeply moved Sankaradeva. So as a social reformer he devoted himself to eradicate such evil practices from the society. The granting of social recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed and status was the most valuable contribution of Sankaradeva. As a conscious reformist he laid emphasis on bhakti and made it accessible to all sections of people irrespective of caste and creed to get the proximity of the Almighty. According to Sankaradeva, everyone from a brahmana to a chandala has the right to offer his devotion to the Supreme Being.

Sankaradeva's humanism which can be termed as creative humanism appeared as a protest against social prejudices and evils that cropped up from the mal-practices of rituals in the name of religion. Sankaradeva had to propagate his 'Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma' to establish creative humanism inherent in his thought. He could foresee in the medieval period itself that India is such a country where any line of thinking can be made understandable to the laymen only when it is tinged with religion. Even B.G. Tilak, Aurobindo. And S. Radhakrishnan were also of the same view that Indian people acquire even the knowledge of politics only with the aid of religion. Hence, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Sankaradeva had no other alternatives but to take resort to religion for the propagation of his creative humanism. He was fully convinced that religion could motivate and accelerate the pace of social change by repudiating the prevalent superstitions and value-structures and by offering socially satisfactory values. Thus Sankaradeva's humanism is not a mere extension of traditional spiritualistic humanism. His humanism is creatively concerned with the re-organization of society as a necessary condition for the ethico-spiritual development of man.

Sankaradeva advised his disciples to consider all creatures in this universe to be the manifestation of the Almighty. The 'Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma' that Sankaradeva preached had immense compassion for those who were regarded as the backward classes of the society during that period of time. His love and care for the people of the backward section of the society was not confined to his literary works only, but he practiced those ideas in real life of those people also. He accepts and welcomes all sections of people in his 'Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma' as his disciple including kaivarta, Hira, Baniya, Kachari, Garo, Miri, Naga irrespective of caste, creed or religion. His "Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharama" is a faith based on tolerance and universal brotherhood and he urges people to cultivate great virtue for the pursuit of well being of mankind. Through universal brotherhood Sankaradeva aimed at installing a spirit of humanism among the masses and brought an equality of existence among all sections of people. He asked people not to exhibit any hostility toward the adherents of other creeds. The great culture created by Sankaradeva also helped to a great

extent in removing the ethnic conflict in the contemporary society. His propagation for the total upliftment of humanity is essentially universal and as such are worthy of being pursued by any individual irrespective of any caste, creed and geographical boundary. In today's human society which can be characterized by ethnic violence, terrorism, social unrest and other evils creating unrest, the human values preached by Sankaradeva have become much more relevant than ever.

Sankaradeva wrote various religious scriptures, dramas, poetry etc. with the strong conviction of spreading the light of true knowledge among the ignorant and illiterate masses. He established namghar as the centre for religious and cultural activities of the people of the state with a vision to create new democratic social order. The free and open atmosphere of namghar invited all sections of people irrespective of their caste and creed. He was of the view that all people are equal and so the people having proficiency were entitled to conduct nama prasanga (congregational prayer) and the recitation of the sacred texts. The orderliness, unity and integrity that still mark the Assamese villages by and large are pre-eminently the results of the namghar which may be described as one of the most outstanding social institutions of India having the inherent strength to withstand many adverse situations. In fact, in the north-eastern part of the country namghars have been playing a significant role in abolishing the rigid caste system and thereby unifying humanity at large.

Sankaradeva, as a great organizer, did not only want to preach the doctrine of Bhakti cult through his nama dharma but became the greatest in remolding and consolidating the fabric of the Assamese social life. Sankaradeva was a great humanitarian. He addressed the entire humanity in his writings, not the population of any region like Assam or even Bharatavarsha. His concept of humanity confers equality upon all creatures and not only among human beings. However, one thing to be observed in the humanistic philosophy of Sankaradeva is that though he appealed to see God in every creature yet he gave greater emphasis on human life. In the opinion of Sankaradeva, man is supreme in the sense that only man has a spiritual world. All creatures other than man are far off this world. Sankaradeva said in favour of the supremacy of man

*“Saphala jivana: yo jantu:*

*Nitu jalpatu rama*

*Kesava nasevi: yo jivaya*

*Bitu kita upama”*

The humanistic philosophy of Sankaradeva on the one hand, is quite scientific and on the other hand it is based on spiritualism. For modern science and technology it is difficult to

define caste and community by the examination of human blood in laboratory. Sankaradeva did not assert equality of man in any scientific laboratory, but he did it in the laboratory of humanism.

Sankaradeva followed the principle of sacrifice taken from the Upanisads in his own life. The real foundation of Sankaradeva's humanism is sacrifice, sacrifice through enjoyment and enjoyment through sacrifice, which is taken from Isopanisad. Sankaradeva believed that the whole universe is temporary which is created by the Supreme Being or the Almighty. He truly realized that humanism cannot be cropped up if we cannot understand the importance and significance of sacrifice. Through the principle of sacrifice, humanism can draw in the spring of happiness to mankind.

Sankaradeva's humanism that can be admitted as a creative humanism adopts a secular outlook which emphasizes upon the reformation of individual first and from this reformation the human society can be gradually reformed. Sankaradeva understood that without moral consciousness social awakening is impossible. The concepts like *niskama karma* of the Gita, Kantian notion of duty for duty's sake indirectly finds its place in Sankaradeva's works. He was advocating for human welfare and creating social consciousness among the people of the society.

Lastly, Sankaradeva's humanistic thought has a democratic appeal. To have a better inter-action and better understanding about the common masses, he gave more importance on faith and less on logic, more on love and less on intellect. He insists on the supremacy of faith over logic in the attainment of the highest end of life which resembles with the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard, who is known as the father of modern existentialism. Soren Kierkegaard also talked about the element of faith or 'leap of faith' (the term used by Soren Kierkegaard) in bridging the gap between himself and super-nature. In different works of modern Indian thinkers also, various view points of humanism have come into light. The humanistic outlook of Rabindranath Tagore is the result of his deep spiritual understanding and meditation. According to Tagore, God may be found if we worship human beings. He said,

*"Amar puja aj samapta hala*

*Devaloktheke manavloke*

*Sunaha manus bhai sabar upare manus satya*

*Tahar upare nai"*

In Assamese literature also, Chandra kumar Agarwala also through his writings admitted man to be the ultimate truth. He said,

*"Manuhei deva*

*manuhei seva*

*Manuh bine nai keva*  
*Kara kara puja                      padya argha lai*  
*Jay jay manav deva”*

#### IV.

So, it has been seen that Sanakaradeva has talked about all the aspects related with the concept of humanity long before any other philosopher or thinker discussed about them. 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. Therefore, the humanistic philosophy of Sankaradeva should remain as the most acceptable theory and practice among the people of the world.

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