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## Sri Śaṅkaradeva's Spiritual Mission: Its Relevance to Present Society

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### Abstract:

*Sri Śaṅkaradeva, the great medieval Vaiṣṇava saint of Assam, laid the concrete socio-cultural foundation through his lasting contribution towards philosophy, religion, literature, art and culture. His Eka-śaraṇa nāma dharma was accessible even for the most ignorant and the humblest. Sri Śaṅkaradeva's faith acted positively in shaping the moral and social standards of an individual. He tried to establish a democratic society deliberating lessons on equality, tolerance, fraternity, non-violence and so on, and spread the message of social harmony.*

*The recent economic, social, scientific and technological developments have made us to forget that there is a spiritual spark inherent in every human being. This serious issue alienates one individual from the other. But long ago, during 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Śaṅkaradeva declared spiritual equality of all men and denounced caste system. He promulgated that a genuine spiritual life would mould the character of an individual. His spiritualistic humanism tried to wipe off the prevailing social and other evils of his time. This paper is a trivial effort to find out how Śaṅkaradeva's spiritual mission has been exercising and restoring healthy influence on the moral, philosophical and social outlook of individuals of present society.*

**Keywords:** Sri Śaṅkaradeva, bhakti, Vaiṣṇavism, society, spiritual, religious

### 1. Introduction

Sri Śaṅkaradeva, the great medieval Vaiṣṇava saint of Assam was a prophet, philosopher, social reformer, artist, musician, dramatist, poet, painter and a linguist all combined in one. His sovereign personality revolutionized Assamese society and culture. As a religious reformer, he established his system of *eka-śaraṇanāma dharma*, the religion of worshipping the One by uttering his name. He adapted the new religion to suit the need of the people. Śaṅkaradeva propagated his new faith of devotion based mainly on the teachings of the *Bhāgavata-Pūraṇa*. He articulately expressed most of the ancient works of *Sanskṛt* on Vaiṣṇava trend in Assamese and *Brajāwalī* language. Śaṅkaradeva tried to broadcast religious knowledge and evoke devotion among the masses. Eminent scholar K.N. Prasad Magadha adequately describes Śaṅkaradeva as an erudite scholar, a poet of considerable merit, a musician of high calibre. He also adds that Śaṅkaradeva was a pioneer in the field of drama and dramatic performance, a painter and above all a great social reformer and religious teacher-preacher-leader of the medieval Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam.

### 2. Objectives of the Paper

- To present a brief sketch of life and contribution of Sri Śaṅkaradeva
- To bring out the significance of his spiritual mission
- To examine the relevance of such mission in present day society

### 3. Methodology

The method used in this paper is descriptive-evaluative method. The study is mainly review based. It is purely supported by secondary and tertiary source of data, i.e. books, new editions of old scriptures, journals, papers and articles and internet.

#### 3.1. Life of Sri Śaṅkaradeva

At the critical moment of religious catastrophe many saints arose in different parts of India. Ramananda, Kabir, Gyaneswar, Tukaram, Ramdas, Mira Bai, Nanak, Chaitanya, Sri Śaṅkaradeva were significant of them. Sri Śaṅkaradeva was contemporaries of famous religious reformers like Chaitanya of Bengal, Vallabhacharya of Andhra, Kabir of Banaras, Nanak of the Punjab and Tulsidas of UP. The religious movement of India, during 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries gave birth to a new religion originated from the doctrine of *Bhakti* as revealed in the *Bhāgavata – Purāṇa* which is considered as Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement. Śaṅkaradeva was essentially an activist of that significant movement.

Śaṅkaradeva's ancestors had migrated to Kamarupa from Kannauj. Kusumbar Bhuyan and Satyasandha were the fortunate parents of Sri Śaṅkaradeva. He was born in 1449 in Ali Pukhuri of Bordowa (in Nagaon district of Assam) and lived 120 years (till 1568). But,

after sad demise of his parents at the very early age of Śaṅkaradeva, granny Khersuti took the responsibility of bringing up him. Right from the childhood Śaṅkaradeva showed his extra ordinary talent. At the age of thirteen, Śaṅkaradeva was admitted Mahendra Kandali's *Tol* (residential school). Immediately after learning the alphabet Śaṅkaradeva composed a verse without using vowels except 'a'. It was a poem or *Komal-git* (*Karatala kamala dala nayana...*) in praise of Lord Viṣṇu.

Śaṅkaradeva married to Suryavati at the age of twenty three. But, hard luck came as she died giving birth to daughter Manu. The incident made him more devoted to his creation. Śaṅkaradeva set out for pilgrimage twice, the first was for 12 years with seventeen companions in 1481 and the second was in 1550 with 120 devotees. After first pilgrimage, many significant events happened to his life and creation; like his second marriage, shifting to Bordowa, establishment of *Nāmghar* (prayer hall) and *Satra*. Because of socio-political disturbances, Śaṅkaradeva could not settle in one place for a long time. But, in spite of such unfavourable circumstances his creative endeavour did never stop. Gradually, attitude of Ahom kingdom became unsympathetic which forced him to settle down at Patbausi. The *Coch* (*Koch*) king Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai become aware of Śaṅkaradeva that he was a precious gem in the field of literature, art, philosophy and religious sphere. They patronized Śaṅkaradeva and invited him to Cochbihar on several occasions for holding religious dialogues.

Sri Śaṅkaradeva was the finest writer of devotional verses. *Harichandra Upākhyān*, *Rukmiṇī Haraṇ kāvya*, *Bhakti Pradīpa*, *Anādi pātan*, *Ajāmil upākhyān*, *Amṛt manthan*, *Balichalan*, *Adyādaśam*, *Nimi-nava siddha samvād*, *Bhāgavata daśam skandha*, *Guṇamālā*, *Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyana*, *Kirttan Ghōṣā*, *Bhakti Ratnākara*, *Patnī prasād*, *Kāliyadaman*, *Keligopāl*, *Rukmiṇī Haraṇ*, *Pārijat Haraṇ*, *Rām Vijay* are significant works of Sri Śaṅkaradeva. All literary and cultural contributions of Śaṅkaradeva were tools to spread the spiritual message of *bhakti* movement among the masses.

### 3.2. Spiritual Mission of Sri Śaṅkaradeva

The '*cari bastu*' (four fundamental principles), *nāma* (devotional utterance), *deva* (God), *guru* (preceptor) and *bhaktā* (devotee) are the four pillars on which the teachings of Śaṅkaradeva were based. His spiritual teaching primarily encouraged devotional, social and ethical aspects of an individual. His prime concern was to gift common people a consistent spiritual life which in the long run led to a sound moral foundation for both individual and social life. The objectives of his religious literature were the development of personality as well as development of communal feeling. His religion *eka-śaraṇa nāma dharma* is a religion of Love for common people.

Śaṅkaradeva's religious faith gave stress on constant recitation (*kirttana*) of names (*nām*) of God (*Hari*). It inspired individual mind for spiritual elevation. Śaṅkaradeva was vocal regarding how *nām kirttana* acts and reacts on the mind of a devotee. He illustrated different practices to go with different persons of diverse tastes and abilities. Śaṅkaradeva stated in the *Kīrttana (Nām-aparādh)* seven spiritual stages-

*"Prathamadahibepātakacay:*

*Karibamahāpuṇyaabhyudaya.*

*Karāivebiṣayatbirakati:*

*Kṛṣṇatbādhibe premabhakati. 65*

*Opajāibeāti Vaiṣṇavajñāna:*

*Māyākokaribedahinīryāna.*

*CaitanyamūrtipūrṇānandaHari:*

*Thaibantatente-ere eke kari. 66*

First *Nām kīrttana* will burn out the sins. (Second), it will arouse great merits. (Third), it will create aversion for worldly pleasures. (Fourth), it will develop loving devotion to God. (Fifth) it will give birth to the mood of a *Vaiṣṇava*. (Sixth) it will extinguish illusion from the mind. (Seventh and the last), it will merge (the devotee) in God who is all life and all joy.

Śaṅkaradeva combined religion with art, literature, mass education and social service. All literary and cultural contributions of Śaṅkaradeva were tools to spread the spiritual message of *bhakti* movement among the masses. He was more practical and consistent. Śaṅkaradeva declared spiritual equality of all men and denounced caste system. He simplified religion accessible for the most ignorant and the humblest. Śaṅkaradeva always urged common people to practice *sadācāra* (good conduct) through his religious preaching. It is a key to establish social harmony. To promote fellow-feeling he gave utmost importance to spiritual values like love, mercy and forgiveness.

Śaṅkaradeva's spiritualistic humanism tried to wipe off the prevailing social evils of his time. He rejected the cultic rituals and preached in its place a religion of love and adoration. Śaṅkaradeva brought the message of the *bhakti* faith to every door. His religion entered into the day to day life of the people and thereby influenced moral, educational, philosophical and socio-political outlook of the Assamese people. He founded the *satras* (monasteries) and *nāmgharas*, (halls for congregational prayer). "Śaṅkaradeva established a new democratic social order in the society with the *nāmghar* (the village prayer house) at the base and the *satra* (central monastery) at the top."<sup>1</sup> The *satras* and *nāmgharas* served as community centres, where people might assemble for community devotional performances like music and drama. Village *nāmghara* were miniature replica of *Satranāmghara*.

The primary functions of *Satra* were-

- i. To propagate *Vaiṣṇavism* and its monotheistic principle
- ii. To provide ethico- devotional codes and rules of conduct
- iii. To hold religious festivals on different occasions.

Besides the primary functions, *satras* took the responsibility of maintaining healthy social relation among the villagers. Consequently, the spirit of co-operation was developed among common villagers. The *satra* also contributed significantly to the spread of education. On the other hand, *nāmghara* functioned as a prayer hall, a cultural centre, a library and a venue of social assemblage. “*Nāmghara* combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village school and a village church.”<sup>2</sup> Śaṅkaradeva was the first man to realize the inevitability of bringing all to a common meeting place.

Śaṅkaradeva enriched the entire cultural life of Assamese people. Dr Maheswar Neog, the eminent scholar of Assam appropriately writes, “The movement of Śaṅkaradeva brought about a new deep and comprehensive outlook of life promoted a healthy social behaviour, organized a new social build-up, fertilized the production of a new *bhakti* based literature in the language of the people and developed a taste for fine arts like music and painting.”<sup>3</sup>

Devotional procedures of Śaṅkaradeva’s *Vaiṣṇavism* only make a distinction between *deva* (God) and *bhakata* (devotee) while *guru* (preceptor) and *nāma* (devotional utterance) are instrumental categories. But, *deva* and *bhakata* are not totally diverse. The act of devotion through the mediating approach of *guru* and *nāma* can invalidate the separation between *deva* and *bhakata*. Śaṅkaradeva introduced his *Nāmdharma* when the very concept of religion had lost its spirit. His religion has no caste, creed and colour bounds. Rather there is a universal appeal to each and every individual of each and every category. In Śaṅkaradeva’s *Vaiṣṇavism* a devotee can transcend the barriers of three *guṇas* in a single life. Criminals, lower class individuals and even nasty spirits can attain liberation if they devote themselves to *Hari* or *Kṛṣṇa*. The ‘*cari bastu*’ of *Vaiṣṇavism* was a great blow to the evils of caste system. Śaṅkaradeva made common people realize that human life had a spiritual fringe.

“The *Eka-śaraṇa* system is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit on the hand of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3. Relevance of the Spiritual Mission of Sri Śaṅkaradeva

The manifold activities and excellence of Śaṅkaradeva enriched *bhakti* movement in such a way that it immensely benefited the people of Assam. BK Barua maintained that Śaṅkaradeva carved out a way for the cultural, spiritual and linguistic growth of Assam. Mass people of Assam, even today with all their hearts sing the verses of the *Kīrtana* in full devotion. *Nām kīrtana* or prayers are practised by the villagers irrespective of high and low castes. Śaṅkaradeva introduced congregational devotional service known as *prasaṅga*. It still remains as a custom of universal singing. Even today, the institution of *prasaṅgas* at the appointed time disciplines the minds of the common people. Again, with accompanying musical instruments give a sacred and tranquil entertainment.

*Bhakti* appeals to the heart. So, it is easy for the common people to practise. To be a true devotee selfless love must be there for the Lord and for all creatures. Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhaktivāda* is essentially philanthropic. All *jivas* are equal, all creations reflect divinity. Equality and equanimity towards all creatures are other significant aspects of Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* movement and it has an ever-present effect even in this century.

Śaṅkaradeva wrote:

*Kukurasaḡgālagardhabharoātmārām*

*Jāniyāsavākoparikaribāpraṇāma*<sup>5</sup>

Lord is not only the soul of mankind; He is also the soul of dogs, foxes, donkeys. Knowing this, salute them all.

*SamastabhutatebyāpiāchomaiHari*

*Sabākomānibātumiviṣṇubuddhi kari*.<sup>6</sup>

I, Hari am pervading all creatures. Accept them all as *Viṣṇu*.

Animal killing and animal sacrifice were strongly condemned by Śaṅkaradeva. In present society, such moral instructions may embody a strong prohibition towards crime and injustice. Moreover, the above verses sound loud when we discuss something regarding new branches of study: like Environmental Ethics, Animal rights, Value inculcation etc.

Śaṅkaradeva spoke about non-discrimination in the path of devotion. In the spiritual realm all are equal and everyone has the right to devotion. Fellow-feeling would not possible without spiritual elevation. Sincere urge to get communion with God inspires each individual to love mankind. In this way, *bhakti* leads to humanism. At present, it can be described as a democratic approach. The inculcation of community worship with simple ceremonials promoted democratic ideas and practices. The significance of Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* movement has been proved to be a strong device for a social reconstruction and regeneration. His *bhakti* movement taught lessons on equality, tolerance, fraternity, non-violence and so on, and spread the message of social harmony. In his verses Śaṅkaradevaspelled out the list of tribes inhabited in different parts of Assam. The motto is to harmonize them and tied them with the thread of *Eka-śaraṇa*. It is also felt as a need of this hour.

Spirituality lives in conscience. It makes one transcend all negative aspects life. Spirituality means being in the right relationship with all. It is an attitude of harmlessness towards all living beings and an understanding of their mutual interdependence. Śaṅkaradeva’s mission was to implant altruistic attitude in the mind of common people. So, he declared *Sakalo prānika dekhibeke ātmasama*<sup>7</sup> (Regard all beings as your own self). Such attitude is relevant to human society irrespective of ancient or modern century.

To wage a war against social evils one must be morally strong. True spirituality in a person’s life consists of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Self purification is strictly enjoined in Śaṅkaradeva’s religion. A true devotee can get victory over jealousy, enmity, pride and so on. For him, God is present in each and every creature. Yet again, the purification of the mind is most important. Important quality of character and essence of good conduct is purity of mind. All social evils of present age are the result of impurity within mind. Long ago, Śaṅkaradeva wrote:

*Mane pāpa mane punya manese naraka* <sup>8</sup>(The mind is the maker of vice, the mind is the maker of virtue and the mind is the maker of Hell)

Śaṅkaradeva's works are full of religious, spiritual and ethical instructions for practising self-discipline. He also suggested that *satsaṅg* (association with the learned and the honest) is a significant aspect of spiritual order. It seems that Śaṅkaradeva anticipated almost all the social issues of present century. Centuries ago, he foresaw the social evils like untouchability, casteism, religious conflicts etc. "He gave us the very kernel of democracy when in his holy *Kirttana* he declared:

*Candālo Hari Nāmalawemātra:*

*Karibaucityajnar pātra.119*

*Smarokmātra Hari dīn-rāti:*

*Nābācebhakati jāti-ajāti.130*

An untouchable is fit to be the priest in a sacrifice only if he often recites the name of God. Let him recite the name of God day and night, *bhakti* will not care for caste high or low." <sup>9</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva's *eka-śaraṇa nāma dharma* opposed to selfishness. *Bhakti* is not a means to any end. Devotion must be desireless. Śaṅkaradeva utters,

*Namāgoho sukha-bhoga nalāge mukuti.*

*Tomāra charane mātṛa thākoka bhakati||*<sup>10</sup>

I do not pray for any enjoyment of pleasures and also am not desirous of salvation. But let me have devotion only at Thy feet.

Śaṅkaradeva's emphasis on *bhakti* never put less importance to knowledge. He, in fact, advocated that knowledge without devotion is futile. One should follow the path of Truth. Śaṅkaradeva maintained,

*Bhakati bihin Jñāna karma save byarthal*

*Kahilo swarūpe Vedāntaro tatva arthall* <sup>11</sup>

(Knowledge and action devoid of devotion is ineffective. I say the truth that is the real import of *Vedānta*). He prescribed that observance of truth in thought, word and act is the real *dharma*. He also wrote,

*Nāhi āna dharmā*

*Jānā satya bine*<sup>12</sup>

(There is no virtue except the observance of truth).

Now-a-days human aspiration of good life seeks only comfort and convenience. Individual wants enough facilities, resources and time for relaxation. But, he is facing the poverty of spirit. Modern society and individual are quite familiar with physical freedom. For them, freedom means political, economical, social, constitutional, etc. They are totally ignorant of spiritual freedom. Spiritual freedom is real freedom; it is freedom from hatred, greed, ignorance, violence, fear and so on.

The realization of the identity of the individual self with the universal self means the identification of oneself with the whole of humanity. Individual soul is a part and parcel of universal soul. It is total destruction of egoism. Apart from the whole, the individual's existence is inconceivable. The road to salvation lies through love of humanity. It indirectly means freedom from social evils and identification of oneself with everything that lives.

Śaṅkaradeva's doctrine of *bhakti* is simple, liberal and humanistic. So, in such religious faith even an ever-busy householder of present day society could have a vision of the Divine in his own terms, own level and in his own domestic atmosphere. Even in modern time, there is every possibility that practice of such religious faith would exclusively promote spiritual regeneration. The highly positive effect of Śaṅkaradeva's religion is that once surrendered life to God cannot be lived according to irrational desires and perverse impulses. So, even amid hectic schedule of day-to-day life if one can afford sometime for this *bhakti* faith, his habits and manners would definitely become purer and his acts would be governed by higher laws.

#### 4. Conclusion

W Durant and A Durant wrote, "The only real revolution is in the enlightenment of the mind and the improvement of character, the only real emancipation is individual, and the only real revolutionaries are philosophers and saints"<sup>13</sup> The inner meaning of this statement is suitably applicable in the case of Sri Śaṅkaradeva. He gifted a pure spiritual life to the common people. The socio-cultural and spiritual revolution brought by Śaṅkaradeva through his *bhakti* faith caused a huge social elevation by fighting against anti-social elements. K.N. Prasad Magadha rightly said that his (Śaṅkaradeva's) faith 'live and let live' had acted positively in shaping the moral and social standard of Assamese life. Though Śaṅkaradeva deserves to be better known in other parts of India, his life and achievement are not much known outside Assam. His spiritual philosophy is yet to be studied systematically and elaborately. S. K. Chatterji in *Essays on Śaṅkaradeva* observed that although circumstances prevented his (Śaṅkaradeva's) influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced and he deserved to be mentioned with Śaṅkarachārya, Rāmanujachārya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mirā bāi, Guru Nānak and Tulsidās.

The great disciple of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva rightly expresses in his verses,

*Srimanta Śaṅkara Hari bhakataru*

*Janā jena kalpataru*

*Tāhānta bināi nāhi nāhi nāhi*

*Āmāra paroma Guru*

Srimanta Śaṅkara is, as it were, the tree that fulfils all kinds of desire (*Kalpa-taru*) of the devotees of *Hari*. Verily, verily do I say I have no other great guru than Sri Śaṅkaradeva.



Śaṅkaradeva, through his religio-devotional outlook bears the mark of equality and fraternity. His hard struggle for an integrated society made him the greatest socio-cultural spokesman of mediaeval Assam. Śaṅkaradeva tried to strengthen spiritual and moral aspects of common individual. His honest aim was to reconstruct society. Social reconstruction in his philosophy means dual revolution-revolution in the minds of man and revolution in the structure of society. Dr Maheswar Neog, the eminent scholar of Assam, appropriately said that the movement of Śaṅkaradeva promoted a healthy social behavior and organized a new social build-up. Śaṅkaradeva was the spiritual torch bearer. He realized that the development of society depended on the education of people and that education should be obviously spiritual education. He wanted to mould the character of common people. His aim was to educate the ignorant using different popular means of communication like music, play, drama, verses and literature. Music and drama were used by Śaṅkaradeva as two strong tools to educate people spiritually. Śaṅkaradeva, who brought a social renaissance in Assam, had sown the seed of democracy six hundred years ago. His religious faith exercised a strong and healthy influence on the moral, philosophical and socio-political outlook of the common people. We should consider his contributions as precious treasure as well as cultural and spiritual inheritance.

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