# UNIT 15: SANKARDEVA: CONCEPT OF BHAKTI, RELATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

## UNIT STRUCTURE


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## 15. 1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- explain Sankardeva's religious philosophy which is popularly known as a form of neo-vaishnavism.
- discuss the meaning of 'bhakti'
- discuss the theological background of Sankardeva's concept of bhakti.
- explain different types of bhakti.
- discuss the concept of God in Sankardeva's vaishnavism
- explain the relation between man and God.

## 15.2 INTRODUCTION

Sankardeva initiated the Vaishnava movement in Assam in the closing decades of the 15th century of the Christian era. This movement was though

in fact a part of the all India vaishnavite movement of the middle ages, yet in course of the practical application and working out of its principles, it assumed a new form which is unique in itself. Though Śaṅkardeva was not a systematic or academic philosopher, the ideological frame work of his thought was provided by the Purānas and mainly Bhāgavatam and the Gitā. The religion propagated by Sankardeva is popularly known as 'Mahapurushia Dharma'. The explanation about the meaning of the term runs as follows- the term 'mahapurushia' is an epithet of God Nārāyana.Bhāgavata prescribed the method of worshiping Lord Krishna with kirtana and to address him as 'Mahāpurusha'. It is also popularly believed that the term 'mahāpurusha' was applied to mean Śaṅkardeva as he was known to his followers as 'Mahan' or the 'great being' and the religion propagated by him came to be known as 'mahāpurushia dharma'.

Sankardeva lays great emphasis on 'ek -sarana'which means surrender to the One. Hence his religion is also known as Ek- Sarania Nam Dharma.

The fundamental outlines of his religious philosophy centers around the following four principles as laid down by Dr. Radhakrishnan-

1. The knowledge of the Supreme reality conceived as Narayana .
2. Surrender to the Supreme in the form of Sri Krishna.
3. Company of good souls, satsanga.
4. Prayer and chanting of the name of the Supreme Being.

This finds institutional expression in the establishment of Sattras and Nāmghars. Śaṅkardeva's thought was a great liberating force in terms of humanism and secular well-being of the Assamese people and served the social and spiritual uplift of the common people.

## 15.3 CONCEPT OF BHAKTI

Śaṅkardeva in his vaishnavism emphasizes the cultivation of the meditative mood as indispensable to religious life. Bhakti or devotion signifies a life given to or devoted to God. The word bhakti, with theallied words, bhāgavat and bhāgavata is derived from the Sanskrit root 'bhaj' meaning 'to

adore'. Bhakti, therefore, has the primary meaning of adoration while bhāgavat means 'the adorable one' and bhāgavata means 'a worshipper of the adorable one'. As a religious term bhakti is defined as 'affection fixed upon the Lord'. The word 'affection' (anurakti) itself is further defined as that particular affection (rakti) which arises after (anu) knowledge of the attributes of the Adorable One'.

In the fifth chapter of the Bhakti Ratnākara, Śaṅkardeva holds that Lord is to be realized through Bhakti over and above other modes of exertion like Jñana. To quote from Bhāgavata, 'Bhakti is the bearer of great fruits.' Śaṅkardeva analyzes the importance of the elements of intellect, action and feelings or emotions and establishes that devotion or bhakti which is based on feelings of love is the ultimate way to God realization.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q 1: When did Śaṅkardeva initiate Vaishnava movement in Assam?

Q 2: State the name popularly given to the religion propagated by Śaṅkardeva and also, explain the meanings of the terms involved thereof.

Q 3: Why is Śaṅkardeva's vaishnavism also known as "Ek-Sarania Nam Dharma"? State the meaning of the term, "ek-sarania"

Q 4: Explain the meaning of the term "bhakti"

### 15.3.1 Nine Modes of Bhakti

The Bhāgavata -purāna emphasizes nine modes of bhakti.

These are-

1. Shravana (listening to the recitation of the names and activities of the Lord.)

2. Kirtana (chanting to the recitation of the names and activities of the Lord.

3. Smarana(recollection of or meditating upon the Lord's form.)

4. Archanā(worship of the Lord's image with flowers etc)

5. Pada-sevana(personal services)

6. Dāsya(servant's way of surrendering ego)

7. Sakhitva (friend's love)

8. Bandanā (obeisance)

9. Deha-arpana(resignation of the awareness of the body)

Of these nine modes of bhakti, Śaṅkardeva takes up only the first four for the explanation.In his Bhakti- ratnākara,shravana and kirtana are given much importance.However, Śaṅkardeva has not neglected the other modes of bhakti.

### 15.3.2 Essential nature of a devotee or 'bhakta'

In Sankardeva's religious philosophy, the term 'bhakti' carries connotative implications. The essential nature of a devotee or bhakta is marked by certain essential features. The five vices namely, sex-lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego along with other associated vices are at a distance from the devotee. Devotion or bhakti is wonderfully powerful to such an extent that even if a man is of a weak character (dustacitta), his sins are immediately burnt. Devotion is powerful even to liberate the evil doers and the chandals. But it is subject to the condition that the devotee must determine himself to one and only one Lord and not to any lesser Gods.

In Śaṅkardeva's devotionalism, the feeling of love is the dominant aspect .It is accompanied by absence of same, fear and desire. Only in suchabsolute self-surrender to the One Lord devotion is possible.

### 15.3.3 Three Grades of Bhakti

In his Nimi-nava-siddha-sambāda, while giving a detailed account of the devotees and the modes of devotion, Śaṅkardeva classifies the devotees into three grades-viz., uttama, madhyama and prakrita. A prakrita bhakta is defined as one who does not adore the devotees (other Haribhaktas), nor does he respect living beings. He worships

God in one and the same idol. He is at the lowest scale of bhakti, but someday, he too will rise to the upper most level when there will be no need for worship with the idols. In the 'Krishna-arcana-mahatmya' chapter of Bhakti -ratnākara a line of demarcation is drawn between an interested (sakami) and the disinterested (niskami) worshippers of God. The former worships God in images with prescribed objects (dravya) while the latter offers such things as he can get, or worships Krishna within his heart (hrdi) with no other offerings .The overall spirit which runs Śaṅkardeva's thoughts permeates the subtle aspects of worship in which meditative contemplation through sravana and kirtana to the names of Hari play the dominant role.

Thus, it may be said that Śaṅkardeva laid the greatest stress on sravana and kirtana (the listening to and the chanting of God's names) as the best types of bhakti, and in his order the other modes of bhakti like arcana (generally speaking idol worship) were not paid much attention to. Although idols came to be kept and worshipped almost in all satras in later times,no image worship was done in a satra during Sankardeva's life-time. According to an eminent interpreter of Sankardeva's thought, the idols (vigrahas) were introduced to many satras as a result of compulsion by the rulers, the influence of icon worshippers (Brahmanas) and the desire for grants and endowments from kings.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q 5: Name two modes of bhakti emphasized by Śaṅkardeva in his Bhakti ratnākara.

Q 6: Describe the essential nature of a devotee or a bhakta.

Q 7: What are the three grades of bhakta approved by Śaṅkardeva?

## 15.4 CONCEPT OF GOD

The contact with another dimension of existence apart from the merely sensible one is one of the basic features of human experience. It is this dimension of experience which presents one with the reality of God. The concept of God in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy brings one to that dimension of experience. Śaṅkardeva writes-"God Nārāyana is the supreme soul and is the one and the only Lord of the universe. Nothing exists without Him. He is the cause (kārana)as well as the effect of the creation (karya). Just as ornaments made of Gold do not differ in substance from Gold itself, similarly, there is no distinction between God as the cause and God as the effect".

Like all other theistic religions Śaṅkardeva conceives God as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent etc. But the real nature of this Being is emphasized by him to be of the nature of consciousness, cit or caitainya. For Śaṅkardeva, God is a spiritual presence, a creative power and exponent of righteousness, duty and love. In what follows, we will consider the nature of God in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy under the headings which are of great metaphysical as well as religious importance.

**1. The unity of God:-the case for monotheism.**

Śaṅkardeva emphasizes that God Nārāyana is the supreme soul and is the one and the only Lord of the universe. Śaṅkardeva while asserting the 'unity of God' lays stress upon the fact that there is a sharp distinction between the reality of God and other realities i.e., the world. In Śaṅkardeva, to believe in one God means to abandon often with contempt many other beliefs, hopes, fears and customs relating to the 'many Gods' or to the other powers whose place or dignity the 'one God' tends to take and to retain. Sankardeva has a lucid description in Bhāgavata of the fate of those who do not direct their devotion entirely to one lord.

The chief point in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy lies in a positive and firm belief in the oneness of God. This is termed as 'monotheism' which is etymologically coined from two Greek words 'monos' and 'theos', which mean the belief in one God.

**2. God as person.**

Another integral part of Śaṅkardeva's concept of God is to conceive Him as a person or personality. This signifies the possibility of personal relations of worship, trust, and love between a devotee and a God. Thus Śaṅkardeva says, "You are the dearest of all to me, there is no other friend oh Uddhava, like you." The personality of God implies one important fact of God's nature as subject. This implies that though God may be beyond our conception, He is not a mere 'it'; but always the higher and transcendent divine Thou.

**3. God as Creative-**

God in Śaṅkardeva's vaishnavism is conceived as the creator of the universe and also a material and efficient cause of this world. The conception of God as creative has certain philosophical implications. Firstly, it offers an answer to the question as to the relation between God and the world. Secondly, this also throws light on the question of the status of the world. The vaishnavism of Śaṅkardeva gives a general answer to such knotty problems. In his AnādiPatan Śaṅkardeva gives a theistic interpretation of creation though he seems to lean on Sankhya doctrine of creation.

**4. God as both immanent and transcendent.**

The concept of God as 'personal' further points to the fact that He is both immanent and transcendent. A transcendent God is one who is beyond the world and exists outside the material world. Immanence means much more than God's entry into the world. It implies that God brings the world into being and sustains it by the energy of His will.

Both the extreme doctrines of immanence and transcendence exclude the possibility of personal communion between God and His devotee. Hence the personal God in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy with whom a devotee can enter into a lively communion is both immanent and transcendent.

**5. The two aspects of God--- Nirguna and Saguna .**

Śaṅkardeva speaks about two aspects of God. One is the concept of God as Nirguna (without attributes) and other is the Saguna (with

attributes). In the very first verse of his Kirtana Ghosa, Śaṅkardeva bows his head down to the nirguna aspect of God, which he calls, "Brahmarupi Sanātana Narāyana".In the compositions of Śaṅkardeva, one can find God possessing metaphysical qualities like non-duality, omnipotence, omniscience etc., as well as moral qualities like mercy, love and compassion. In order to favour his devotee and redeem them, He comes down in the form of various incarnations. In Nirguna aspect, God is formless, invisible through the gross eyes, eternal, unborn, fearless, incomprehensible, self-existent and so on. He is the primal being, infinite, without beginning, and without end

Śaṅkardeva's emphasis on the nature of God as pure consciousness shows the influence of Bhāgavata Purāna and the Gitā on him.

It is to be pointed out that though Sankardeva addresses the adorable deity by the names of Krishna, Narāyana, Hari, etc., such a God is not confined to any particular name. He is the universal God of all mankind and such aGod can be experienced within one's own heart.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.8: Fill up the blanks-

a. In his---------- Śaṅkardeva gives a theistic interpretation of creation.

b. In the first verse of his ---------- Śaṅkardeva bows his head down to the nirguna aspect of God.

## 15.5 RELATION BETWEEN MAN AND GOD

Throughout his religious literature Śaṅkardeva has made it clear that religion is not for religion's sake. It is man which is the all-important inspiring factor of his religious philosophy. The relation between God and man in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy may be analyzed as follows-

In the vaishnavism of Śaṅkardeva, one finds that divine-human relationship is a living relation. God has meant this earth to be the means of man's spiritual growth. A man has to use his body and the objects he possesses in worshipping God and serving His creatures.

But man, who turns himself towards God, also finds himself trapped in a primal bondage. This is caused by a tremendous sense of egoism or pride. It is due to the wrong identification of imperishable self with the perishable objects of the world. It is this falsehood or pride, which is responsible for all our woes, which gives a wrong orientation to our thoughts, words, and deeds and to our feelings. Śaṅkardeva asserts that of all spiritual diseases, egoism, that is, all 'sweet' talk ending up with oneself is the most intolerable which is incurable except by divine grace. This in short is the state of the worldly man who is caught up in the trap of delusions. Śaṅkardeva emphasizes that man's ego, acts as a separatist force between man and God and this is to be obliterated through devotion. In Prahlād carit, Śaṅkardeva has depicted Hiranyakasipu, to represent such an unregenerate man whom Prahlād, the regenerated soul tries to show the path.

Thus man as he stands in the world in his present state is in a degenerate condition separated from his original divine source through the veil of delusion, pride, egoism, etc. According to Śaṅkardeva, the problem of evil is only a problem of man's imperfection. Man as spiritual effort maker, is therefore in a journey, which suggests an evolutionary movement from comparative necessity to freedom in man's life. The more a man is free from the vices the nearer is he to God.

This requires an ordinary man (prakrita bhakta) to become a perfect devotee (uttama bhakta) in the truest sense of the term. The path offered by Śaṅkardeva is the path of devotion which a man is to choose for the attainment of the highest goal. Devotion becomes a life life-course which will lead a man steadily on to the true path. Such a life-course will result in an existence where a man's life is in tune with the infinite.

This is the personalistic monotheism. Here one finds man in dependence upon his Lord- to be an agent, a being capable of free choice. A man through

religious pursuits is to communicate with the highest life. Such a man sees further into reality than ordinary mortals. The world will be present to him in its spiritual significance. In this way human consciousness is brought in touch with the divine.

### 15.5.1 Grace of God and Man

Śaṅkardeva has made a constant reference to the aspect of divine grace throughout his works. Grace of God is a loving will of God which forms His essence. God's grace manifests itself in incarnation, revelation, in providence and redemption of the sinful nature of man and in the reinforcement of his struggling moral will by timely assistance. The grace of God is a saving power of God which man can face and feel with the accompanying consciousness that the righteous Lord is summoning him to be one with Him in His righteousness and in the purposes of His kingdom. Submission to grace i.e., to God's loving will is thus an ultimate experience of receptiveness and freedom fused in one which is fundamental to all moral life.

It is God who is responsible for that attunement of man to truth. For this man's individual effort is essential but it is not the paramount factor. Here divine grace supersedes karma.

In the doctrine of grace, one finds again personalistic monotheism which is characteristic of the religion of bhakti.

It is through the doctrine of grace, the spirit of God is conceived as working in and through the spirit of man. The divine influence cannot be regarded as a mechanical force as it is not compatible with the conception of God as love.

Thus, it has been seen that vaishnavism as propagated by Śaṅkardeva is the meeting between God as such and man as such.



**CHECK YOR PROGRESS**

Q. 9. What is the primal bondage of man according to Śaṅkardeva

Q 10. Fill up the blanks:

a. According to Śaṅkardeva the problem of evil is only a problem of man's --------.

b. Śaṅkardeva offers the path of --------to a tune man with the infinite.



## 15.6 LET US SUM UP

- The vaishnavism of Śaṅkardeva propounds a philosophy of oneness which demands in its religious aspect a supreme surrender by the devotees to One Supreme Being.
- This Being is personal and seeks a total and unqualified response from His subjects. This is called monotheism.
- It is not a belief in any particular God.
- Rather, it is the confirmation of One Universal Being who is both immanent and transcendent in the universe.
- Though Śaṅkardeva addresses the adorable deity by the names of Krishna, Narāyana, Hari etc., yet, such a God is not confined to any particular name.
- He is universal God of all mankind. Such a God can be experienced through the practice of bhakti or devotion.
- Śaṅkardeva has conceived the spirit of God as working in and through the spirit of man.
- He emphasizes that man's ego that acts as a separatist force have to be obliterated.

- Śaṅkardeva has made a constant reference to the aspect of divine grace throw-out his works.
- It is a loving will of God which forms His essence.
- Divine grace manifests itself in incarnation, and revelation, in providence and redemption of the sinful nature of man and in the reinforcement of his struggling moral will by timely assistance.
- Submission to grace i.e., to God's loving will is thus an ultimate experience of receptiveness and liberty fused in one which is fundamental to all moral life.



## 15.7 FURTHER READINGS

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## 15. 8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q No. 1:** Śaṅkardeva initiated the Vaishnava movement in Assam in the closing decades of the 15th century of the Christian era.

**Ans to Q No 2:** The religion propagated by Śaṅkardeva is popularly known as 'Mahapurushia Dharma'. The explanation about the meaning of the term runs as follows- the term 'mahạpurushia' is an epithet of God Nārāyana. Bhagavata prescribed the method of worshiping Lord Krishna with kirtana

and to address him as 'Mahāpurusha'. It is also popularly believed that the term 'mahāpurusha' was applied to mean Śaṅkardeva as he was known to his followers as 'Mahan' or the 'great being' and the religion propagated by him came to be known as 'mahāpurushia dharma'.

**Ans to Q No. 3:** Śaṅkardeva lays great emphasis on 'ek -sarana'. Hence his religion is also known as Ek- Sarania Nām Dharma.The term 'ek-sarana' means 'surrender to the one.'

**Ans to Q No. 4:** The word bhakti, with the allied words, bhāgavat and bhāgavata is derived from the Sanskrit root 'bhaj' meaning 'to adore'. Bhakti therefore, has the primary meaning of adoration while bhagavat means 'the adorable one' and bhagavata means 'a worshipper of the adorable one'. As a religious term bhakti is defined as 'affection fixed upon the Lord'. The word 'affection' (anurakti) itself is further defined as that particular affection (rakti) which arises after (anu) knowledge of the attributes of the Adorable One'.

**Ans to Q. No 5:** In his Bhakti- ratnākara ,shravana and kirtana are given much importance.

**Ans to Q No. 6:** In Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy, the term 'bhakti' carries connotative implications. The essential nature of a devotee or bhakta is marked by certain essential features. The five vices namely, sex-lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego along with other associated vices are at a distance from the devotee.

**Ans to Q No. 7:** Śaṅkardeva classifies the devotees into three grades-viz., uttama, madhyama and prakrita.

**Ans to Q No. 8:** a) Nimi-nava- siddha sambāda. b) Kirtana-ghosā.

**Ans to Q No 9:** Śaṅkardeva says that man, who turns himself towards God, also finds himself trapped in a primal bondage. This is caused by a tremendous sense of egoism or pride. It is due to the wrong identification of imperishable self with the perishable objects of the world. It is this falsehood or pride, which is responsible for this primal bondage.

**Ans to Q No 10:** a) imperfections b) devotion.



## 15.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions

Q 1: In Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy, the term 'bhakti' implies what?

Q 2: What is Mahapurusha Dharma?

Q 3: State the meaning of 'ek sarania'.

Q 4: What is the etymological meaning of the term 'monotheism'?

B) Short Questions (Answer in about 150-200 words)

Q 1: Write a short note on 'grace' of God.

Q 2: Give a Fundamental outline of Sankardeva's religious philosophy.

Q 3: Write a short note on Śaṅkardeva's concept of Bhakti.

C) Long Question (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Explain Śaṅkardeva's concept of bhakti. State in this connection what are the nine modes of bhakti.

Q 2: Give a brief outline of Śaṅkardeva's concept of God.

Q 3: Analyze the relation between man and God in Śaṅkardeva's religious philosophy.

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