

SANKARDEVA AND AMBEDKAR ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to single out the thoughts of Sankardeva and Ambedkar with special emphasis on equality and social justice. Sankardeva attempted to rescue the deprived people and establish equality and social justice in the form of a new socio-religious order called Neo-Vaisnavism, Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. Ambedkar also attempted to free the Untouchables with other deprived sections of the society from casteism which was the most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage. He favoured for a social democracy which will help to bring social equality and live with self-respect as well as dignity in the society. It seems that Ambedkar was always rationalistic in his philosophical thought, but Sankardeva was not more anxious to logical reasoning in his thought. This paper attempts to give a closer and an analytic insight into the ideas and ideals of both of them.

Keywords: *Caste, Equality, God, Religion, Social Justice etc.*

1. Introduction

Mahapurusa Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) was not only an Assamese religious preceptor, but also a social reformer who is considered by his followers as an incarnation of God because of his multi-faceted contribution to the mankind as well as his perfect life. He founded the *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, which preached devotion (*Bhakti*) to a single God, Lord Krishna. He talked of universal love for all being as God resides within all beings. He made an appeal to all people to remove mutual differences between different classes of people, all of them having the same soul within. Thus he talked of universal brotherhood and advocated for integration of different groups of people in the society.

Sankardeva taught people that idol worship was unwarranted as the almighty God was not confined to a mere idol. God is an all pervading consciousness, which manifests itself in the form of different creatures. Since all the creatures have the same God within them in the form of souls, they are all equals. So, he began to preach equality among the people. He gave equal status to all his disciples. It was a major departure from the prevalent system in the society, where caste hierarchy was observed very strictly. At that time upper caste people were offered access to the knowledge of scripture. Sankardeva opened the door of religion to all different classes of men. The Shudras, Muslims, Tribals- all were initiated by him in his path-breaking religious system of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar(1891-1956), a great Indian national leader of the twentieth century was an intellectual, scholar, statesman and contributed greatly to the reconstruction of the Indian nation. He led a number of movements to emancipate the downtrodden masses and to secure human rights to millions of depressed classes. He has left an indelible imprint through his immense contribution in framing the Constitution of India. He stands as a symbol of struggle for achieving social justice and equality. There are so many incidents in his life which made him realize the need for social justice. Ambedkar had to study Sanskrit by sitting outside the classroom; he was not allowed to stay at a hotel in Baroda and many more. These incidents provided the impetus in the thought of Ambedkar to work for social justice and equality.

2. Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to make a reflection on the thoughts of Sankardeva and Ambedkar with special emphasis on equality and social justice. This study will specifically consider their philosophies concerning social status of human, its significance and value. This study will have the following objectives.

- (i) To compare the ideas of Sankardeva and Ambedkar regarding equality of human and synthesize them if it is possible.
- (ii) How far Sankardeva and Ambedkar's ideas and ideals on social justice are relevant and acceptable in modern Indian perspectives.

3. Methodology

The method to be used for the proposed study is historical and analytical methods. However, descriptive and comparative methods are also used to give a proper estimate of their ideas on social justice. It is going to concern with the philosophy of liberty, equality and fraternity, and finds a scope for peaceful living of all human beings irrespective of caste, creed and religion. In order to meet the same, materials are collected from both primary and secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, websites etc.

4. Discussion

The society, where Sankardeva was born, was full of superstitions. Most of the people were the blind supporters of Saktism, Tantricism and practised all sorts of evil deeds. Sankardeva realized the causes of degradation of the society and he tried heart and soul to reform it. The influence of Buddhism at that time was also very great. The so-called votaries of irreligion being guided by their extremely selfish motives tried to dominate over the social customs of that time and they were in fact responsible for distorting the noble teachings of both Buddhism and Hinduism. Sankardeva says that the incarnation of the Buddha had been setting aside the Vedic way and the ignorant people were misled by the Brahmin scriptures. Even they were intoxicated and unruly in conduct, the messages neither meditate on the feet of God nor take His name. As he writes in the 'Caturvimsati Avatara', *Kirtanghosa-*

*Buddha avatara veda pantha kari sanna /
Bamanaya sastre muhi asa ajnana. // (2/13)*

Sankardeva was undoubtedly the boldest social reformer ever born in Assam. Standing firm against all ills and injustice in the society he effected the most revolutionary reform in which there was a social reorganization of man irrespective of caste, creed or colour. In the *Kirtanghosa*, it is considered that caste division is a serious social evil. This social evil destroys the peace, discipline and unity among the members of the society. The feeling of hatred and cruelty was developed in human mind due to the caste division. According to Sankardeva, human beings should be guided by understanding that everything is created and sustained by one Lord Visnu. Various distinctions among the people are harmful for the social integration. This sort of evil feeling in the human mind can be removed by the help of love and sympathy for each other.

The most tragic outcome of Vedic degeneration was the ugly concept of casteism in which the so-called upper classes closed all the doors of wisdom and worship to the so-called lower classes. The lower class people were deprived of all socio-political right in the society. Sankardeva was a saint who thought over this social hinderance five hundred years ago and tried to rescue the downtrodden people.

In the *Kirtanghosa*, Sankardeva advises that God exists in all animals and human beings and therefore, we should show respect them equally. Sankardeva says as follows-

Kukura candala garddavaro atmarama /

Janiya savako pari kariba pranama // (Sri Krishnar Baikuntha Prayan, 4/40)

It means that the souls of dogs, *Candals* (untouchable human) and asses are truly God and with that idea in mind, they shall be respected. Sankardeva attempted to abolish the class and caste distinction through preaching his *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. Many verses of the *Kirtanghosa* teach us the true significance of fundamental equality of all religions and the unity of God head.

Sankardeva held the banner of revolt against excessive rituals, superficial formalities of religion and domination of priestly class. He brought a new message of hope to the common people that they could also attain spiritual excellence through simple devotion and faith in one Supreme God. The compassionate saint who saw the Supreme being in all forms of life and respected the inner souls of all including even the humblest creatures did not find any justification behind the system of abhorring man only on consideration of so-called low birth. (Chakraborty, p. 105)

Sankardeva tried to annihilate all prejudices of caste-creed and rank. His teachings embrace the lowliest of the lowly. For him, there is no distinction of castes in *Bhakti* and everybody has equal right to chant the *Harinama*. In the *Kirtanghosa* as he says-

Nahi bhakatita jati-ajati vichar /

Krisnata bhakti samastara adhikara. //

Sankardeva not only renounced and exposed the hollowness of untouchability but also gave initiation to the so-called lowly born ones in the same manner as he did to those of the higher castes. The Almighty was against all forms of social debility like untouchability and the vehemence of external formalities launched by the saint went a long way in ridding the

Bhaila dui karna tara dui bhiti gata //
Hari guna nagai kare anase byakhyana /
Jana jihba bhaila tara bengara samana // (Bhakti-Ratnawali, 575-578)

Thus, self-contradictory outlook of Sankardeva who explains *Bhagavati Dharma* as ‘*Parar dharmak nihinsiba kadacit, Huiba shanta citta sarvadharmata batsala*’ puts us in confusion whether he was an advocate of equality and social justice in true sense of the term. In this context Satyendranath Sarma rightly says- ‘Sectarianism and intolerance of the Vaisnava and the Vaisnava writers offer a strange contrast to their ideal of humility and love. The Vaisnava writers pronounce a universal anathema against all who do not belong to their sect’. (Sarma, 1966, p. 64)

It appears that Sankardeva was not against class distinction as he writes in the *Bhagavata* that who does not recognize caste and inter-caste, and moves to the door steps of others, he is punished by the king of death.

Bandhe taka bajrakut shimalira gache //
Galata lagaya dol uparaka tane /
Bandhi pawe ajuri talaka lagi ane //
Sarirar mansha cindoi nathake cetana /
Kataba baris bhunje Pataki jatana // (Bhagavat-6/5292-3)

It also appears that Sankardeva recognized four divisions of caste such as Brahman, Kshatriya, Baishya and Shudra as he writes-

Jak srajibaka matra iccha bhaila jata /
Mukhata brahmana janma bhailanta saksyat //
Bahuta kshatriya baishya uruta janmila /
Pada pankajata shudra jata upajila // (Anadi Patan-117)

So, it is noteworthy to admit that Sankardeva was not against casteism. In this regard Maheswar Neog rightly says –‘Sankara did not venture to pull down caste distinctions’. (Majumder, 1972, p. 659) It is seen that there is no inter-caste marriage (*Asabarna Vibaha*) among the *Bhaktas* of the *Satras* and inter-dining of the *Bhaktas* irrespective of caste and creed although they sit together for devotional ceremony.

It is the positive aspect of Sankardeva regarding casteism that he opened the door of *Nama Dharma* for the people of all castes as he writes-

Stri sudra antyajati tako siksha diba mati
Dharibe sisabe aho prane / (Nimi Navasiddha Sangbad-330)

In his trend all people without any caste could have accepted his *Dharma* as he wrote-

Stri balya briddha samastare adhikara /
Candalako kare name tekhane uddhara // (Bhagavat-2/404)

Though it is said that Sankardeva was not anxious to initiate women to his *Dharma*, but it is seen that there was no more avoiding attitude to women as Sankardeva himself gave initiation to *Candari*, *Banara* (household helper) etc. and also to the wives of Chilaraya in his *dharma*. (Barman. 1986, p. 106) Hence it can be said that Sankardeva opened the door of *Bhakti* to Hari for all people of different classes, although he was not against casteism. All of

Shudra and Candala have equal rights in his *Nama-Dharma*. This is how, it is clear that he became able to bring a state of equilibrium in the minds people. We cannot deny that the teachings of the social philosophy of Sankardeva have helped to uproot the social evils like the difference between high and low, family tradition and shown the principle of democratic socialism which is based on social equality and community development.

According to Ambedkar, Chaturvarna was the main disgrace in Hinduism, it never allowed a vast majority to make their contributions to the advancement of social cause. Concerning the degraded system of Hindu society he observed, “the Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognize the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity”. (Ambrdkar, 1987, p. 144) He criticized the inherent indignities in the *Varna* system and caste practices. His reaction to the degraded Varna system was, “Caste has ruined Hindus: reorganization of Hindu society on the basis of *Chaturvarna* is impossible because the *Varnavyavastha* is like a leaky pot or like a man running at the nose. It is incapable of sustaining itself by its own virtue and has an inherent tendency to degenerate caste system unless there is a legal sanction behind it which can be enforced against every one trespassing his Varna”. (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 114) In connection with the concept of Brahma, Ambedkar elaborates the democratic scope of an orderly social change and integration which will ever sustain liberty and equality on a fraternal mode. He explains that if all persons are parts of Brahma then all are equal and all must enjoy the same liberty which is meant by democracy.

Ambedkar was against the concept of Hindu social system and did not like Hindu religion. He believed that conversion of religion is to give social justice and he observed that Buddhism is the best way to be adopted to promote peaceful social livelihood. He said, “by discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn, I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Visnu. I am no more a devotee to any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shraddha. I will strictly follow the eight-fold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion”. (Larbeer, 2003, p. 82)

Jawaharlal Nehru also recognizes that Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, a democrat and his efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in society. (Nehru, 1946, p. 141) Ambedkar said, ‘No caste, No inequality, and No superiority: all are equal. That is what the Buddha stood for’. (Ambedkar, 1957, p. 301) Thus it is seen that Ambedkar was an advocate of Buddhist principles.

According to Ambedkar, Brahmins dominated the Hindu society and he observed that the fundamental principles of Brahminism are-

- i) Graded inequality between different classes.
- ii) Complete disarmament the Shudras and the Untouchables.
- iii) Complete prohibition of education of the Shudras and the Untouchables.
- iv) Ban on the Shudras and the Untouchables occupying places of power and authority.

v) Complete subjugation and suppression of women.

So, Ambedkar was against to Brahminism as it is full of inequalities and incorporating social injustice to men which is an obstacle to proper development of individual and society as well.

Ambedkar's perspective of social justice is based on social democracy which consists of liberty, equality and fraternity. He addressed in constituent assembly that- "the third thing we must do is not to be content with mere political democracy. We must make out political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life, which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separated items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy". (Larbeer, 2003, p. 64) These principles are fundamental elements of a just society.

According to Ambedkar, liberty is divided into two categories: Civil liberty and Political liberty. His notion of civil liberty deals with three basic opinions- liberty of movement, liberty of speech and liberty of action. Political liberty consists of the rights of the individuals to share in the framing of law and making and unmaking of governments. He believed that liberty is accompanied with social and economic equality, there must be knowledge (education) made available to all. These liberties are restricted by old Hindu social system but these are the part of the human liberty to create just social order. (Kumar, 2011)

For Ambedkar, "Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians, all Indians being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life". (Jatava, 1997, p. 96) He believed that democracy offers every individual to achieve social equality, economic and political justice guaranteed in the preamble of the Constitution. Liberty, equality and fraternity should be the only alternative to abolish caste society and thereby to create a just society for the development of all beings irrespective of caste, creed and religion.

Ambedkar's struggle for the uplift of the socially excluded people was spiritual in the sense that it intends to restore their lost dignity and make them equal with all other sections of the society. He imbibed the true spirit of democracy and constitutionalism, and hence the method was democratic-constitutional method. As he spoke- "My final words of advice to you are **educate**, **agitate** and **organize**; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality". (Keer, 1971, p. 351)

5. Conclusion

Analyzing the ideas of equality advocated by both of them, it becomes clear that Sankardeva attempted to rescue the deprived people and establish equality and social justice in the form of a new socio-religious order called Neo-Vaisnavism, *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. According to Sankardeva, the status of man in the society should not be measured by the caste, a true devotee of God belongs to a low caste should be considered as great one. Although we have seen little bit self-contradiction regarding equality and liberty among the thoughts of Sankardeva, yet keeping aside those negative aspects, we should imbibe in our mind the very idea of caste and colourless devotion to all living beings which is the fundamental teaching of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. Ambedkar also played an extraordinary role to establish exploitation less society and free the Untouchables with other deprived sections of the society from casteism which was the most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage. He attempted to establish a social democracy and thereby to social justice which will help to bring social equality and live with self-respect and dignity in the society.

It is observed that both Sankardeva and Ambedkar are great social reformers whose teachings are attempting to liberate the people from the evils and prejudices in the society. But regarding the means for emancipation of the human, Ambedkar is seemed to be more pragmatic and rationalistic than Sankardeva as Ambedkar has taken ideal, educational, unitary, political and constitutional measures to establish social justice for the deprived sections of society. On the other hand, in Sankardeva's movement political and constitutional measures for the emancipation of human are seemed not to be incorporated. It may be noted that had there been Sankardeva in modern times, he might also have taken political and constitutional measures as the need of the hour.

Another point of difference between them is that Sankardeva believed in incarnation of God whereas Ambedkar had no faith on the philosophy of incarnation and said that Buddha was not an incarnation of Visnu. Again, Ambedkar was always rationalistic in his philosophical thought, but Sankardeva was not more anxious to reasoning in his thought. Sankardeva says- '*Tarka vedagam - jnan yoga sastre - purusak kore andha*' and gives infinite importance only on devotion for the salvation of human. He was indifferent to logical reasoning. (Barman, 1986, p. 148-149) In the present day society where atrocities of one person to other or others are going on, there is an essential need in spreading the message of Sankardeva and Ambedkar among the misguided and deprived sections of the society. It can be said that this proposed study will give a closer and an analytic insight into the ideas and ideals of both of them, and also provide us a scope to think critically whether the members of the society really enjoy social justice based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

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